

# Walter & Sonya: Conversation Summary

## Four Languages, One Home — On Inheritance, Identity, and the Gift of Multiplicity

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Audio version: <https://www.walterfreiberg.com/sonya>

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### [00:00] Who Is Sonya

Sonya Rumpf was born in Northampton, Massachusetts, to a German mother and an American father of Jewish origin. Her parents met while backpacking in Peru — intercultural connection was in her story before she was. She spent childhood summers in Germany with her mother's family, lived there for a year during high school, and later earned a Rotary scholarship that took her to Medellín, Colombia, where she studied and worked for two years.

In Medellín she met Juan David — Johnny — first as a friend, later as her husband. Today they live in Massachusetts with their three children. Sonya speaks to the children in German; Johnny speaks to them in Spanish. Their oldest daughter attends a Mandarin immersion school.

Four languages. One home.

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### [03:00] When Spanish Stopped Being a Language You Spoke

Walter opens with the question that anchors the series: the moment a language crosses a threshold and becomes something else — something you live in rather than perform.

For Sonya, it happened in Medellín, and it happened fast. She was the only foreigner at her university. Her circle spoke no English. The first months were exhausting.

"At first I had to make a lot of effort, it was very difficult — I was in class with a dictionary, lost all the time. And I would say

that after three or four months, I just started to live there. I stopped worrying so much about making mistakes. I was just going to enjoy living. And that's how I learned faster too."

The shift wasn't linguistic — it was attitudinal. She stopped managing the language and started inhabiting it.

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### **[07:00] Who She Was When She Left Colombia**

Walter asks about the before and after — who arrived in Colombia, who departed.

Sonya's answer is expansive. The stakes were high: Colombia is where she met her husband, where she built independence, where a particular version of herself came into focus.

"When I left Colombia, I felt like a citizen of the world, really. I had friends from all over. I felt very easy moving around Latin America — living in an apartment alone, working for a company in Medellín. That opened my eyes to the richness of being in an international community."

She traces the thread back further — to parents who had always put her in contexts of diversity: a Vietnamese family they adopted for years, travel throughout South America, childhood friends from many backgrounds. Colombia didn't create the orientation. It confirmed it and deepened it.

"The connection with people, regardless of what language, what part of the world, what race — I felt the ease of connecting with people through that border. That was something that really is very central to who I am."

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### **[13:00] A Language of Love — Spanish Between Two**

Walter turns to what happens to a language when it lives inside a relationship.

Sonya and Johnny began in Spanish — it was the shared medium of their friendship in Colombia, the context of their first connection. When he

moved to the United States, English gradually became the dominant register between them. That shift was natural, not negotiated.

"I would say that the foundation of the relationship is more in English, but with a lot of Spanish mixed in. And a lot of times we change. I think that has to do with the context we're in now."

What she values most isn't the predominance of one language or the other — it's the mutual fluency in each other's worlds.

"I understand his language, I understand his culture, his country. He understands my culture, my country, my language. That informs a lot. That's why I think when someone wants to learn a language, it's very important to go, to live, to be in that context — because the word is one thing, but the way that people apply the language comes mixed in there with the language."

At the family table with the children, Spanish returns as the deliberate choice. Alone together, English tends to take over. The languages follow the room.

"It's something very natural."

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## **[20:00] Speaking to Her Children in Her Mother's Language**

Sonya speaks German to her children — and this is perhaps the most unusual thread in her story, because German is her second language. Her mother is a native speaker; Sonya absorbed it through summers in Germany, a year abroad in high school, and a years-long gap when almost no German entered her life. It came back through motherhood.

What makes it remarkable is that the decision was never exactly a decision.

"I didn't know before I had my first daughter that it was going to be something so important to me. When she was born, I started speaking to her in German — it came out in German. And every time I did more songs in German, children's books in German. It wasn't like an intention. It wasn't like an objective. It just happened."

Her oldest daughter, now seven, has surpassed her mother in certain areas of German fluency — absorbing books, music, films with a child's ease. Walter notes the evidence: when the student surpasses the teacher, the method is working.

Sonya's original fear was connection — that a language barrier might create distance between mother and daughter.

"My biggest concern was that it was going to impact the relationship. That she wasn't going to understand me, that she wouldn't feel she could talk to me about something. But the truth is that has never been a problem."

She holds the line with consistency, which she names as the key.

"I'm always so clear that I only speak German. Let's see how long this will last. Every year I think, okay, maybe we'll start speaking English this year. And it just goes on in German."

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### **[29:00] The Language of the Interior**

Walter asks a question he poses in German: when Sonya is angry, sad, or happy — internally, without an audience — in which language does that happen?

"Mostly in English, I think. Like when I write in my diary, or when I think."

She attributes this to context more than identity: English is the dominant atmosphere of her current life. She doesn't remember which language she thought in during the two years in Medellín, or the year in Germany. But the interior voice, for now, is English.

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### **[33:00] German Lost and Regained**

Sonya maps the arc of her German. It began at home, half-received — her mother speaking German while she answered in English, resistant to being different. It deepened in the German summers, in the friendships formed in the village where her grandmother lived. The year in high school consolidated it.

Then came the gap. Nearly a decade of minimal German. Then Colombia, her husband, Spanish. Then children — and German returning, this time through her own mouth, in her own home, directed at her own daughters.

"It was like a new capital of German. Now I'm learning it again, but it's not as strong as it used to be. And it comes back again and again."

The trajectory is circular: language received from a mother, neglected, reclaimed, and now passed to children who may one day carry it further.

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### **[39:00] Coaching as the Thread**

Switching into German, Walter asks about Sonya's career — and eventually back into English to fully explore it. Coaching, she says, has been a thread running through every job she's held, even when it didn't carry that name. She managed cross-cultural teams across regions for years before the label arrived.

"I feel like the thread also in my career has been intercultural connections. So leading teams cross-culturally, across regions. And now I'm curious to see how to integrate that in coaching."

She notes with a kind of wondering curiosity that all her coaching work to date has been in English. She sees Walter as a model for what it might look like to do this work across languages.

"You're a role model for what that looks like."

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### **[46:00] Who She Is When She Puts It All Together**

Walter's closing question, as in every conversation in the series: *Who are you when you bring all these languages together?*

Sonya's answer arrives with a quality of settled ease — not the answer of someone who has resolved a tension, but of someone who never experienced the languages as tension in the first place.

"That's the cool thing — I feel like I'm Sonya. It's almost like I am the most pure form of me. The human being transcends the

language, the culture. In some ways, it feels like there might be layers added on, but in a way I feel like it allows me to be a more solid version of myself. These are different flavors and ways I can express myself."

She names multiplicity not as complexity to be managed but as a gift to be given — and gives it deliberately to her children, without insisting they claim it the same way.

"We are all multitudes. We have so many different facets of ourselves — welcome them all. Give them the opportunity to explore. They don't have to, but at least we've given them the opportunity to identify with some of these languages, cultures, whatever it may be in their lives."

Walter's response: *You are giving them the gift of a multi-faceted life. A multi-faceted identity.*

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*Conversation conducted in Spanish, German, and English. Quotes lightly edited for readability while preserving Sonya's voice and meaning.*

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