

Speech for the Young Interpreter Award 2019

“The future belongs to those who prepare for it today”

Dear EU Interpreters,
Dear Fellow Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In an ever-changing world, where everything mutates in a rather uncontrolled and fast pace, what will never change is the vast diversity of people which shapes all of humankind. It is important to acknowledge this, not to categorise people by their religion or sex or skin colour, but to understand and see them in a non-judgmental and spotless fashion. You may wonder what this has to do with the interpreting profession, why and how being aware of this could improve our performances. I will expand on my point by telling you my story.

My name is Claudia, and I come from a small village in the centre of Italy, where people are eager to hear about my accomplishments, to know about my life. We are inherently curious about the others, nevertheless sometimes it is not enough to deeply understand them. Usually, when I am asked about my life, I answer by saying that I am studying conference interpreting and few people have not the faintest idea of what it means. I am talking about people who do not work in this field, yet ordinary people who could possibly need and resort to our services. Thus, I always find myself explaining them that I would like to become an interpreter, but this only contributes to raising further doubts. So I finally give up and say that I am studying languages, but it is not that simple: we do not just study languages. When I am lucky enough I find somebody who do know what an interpreter does: “they translate speeches from a language into another one” they usually state, and that is correct, but still not accurate enough. However, against this latter backdrop, the conversation can move on, since my interlocutor seems to know the matter. The question they are likely to pose afterward is: why have you chosen this career? The first time I experienced this kind of interaction, I was stumped by this very question. I started to dig into my thoughts to reach the core of my motivation, not that I was required to, but for this

question had triggered the will to find a reason for this choice. I did not want it to come across as an impulsive decision so I needed to spot the underlying meaning and find something deeper than the mere words: I am studying interpreting because I like languages.

Therefore, I looked back to the end of my high school career when I was supposed to decide what future I wanted to forge for myself. Actually, I started from a simple assumption: I do love languages, and dealing with people coming from different backgrounds, and my stream of consciousness began right there. I soon found out that linguistic mediation would help me reconcile these two things, but back then I was not aware of what this path would have demanded me to change. I have always thought myself to be a shy person, that I would have never delivered a speech before thousands of people without blushing or stammering. When I was told that being gripped by the fear of failure was a luxury that I could not afford, I knew I needed to find a reason to continue studying. I looked for inspiration in the power of words, analysing how well-structured sentences could have a great deal of impact on communities and nations so that people can start wars, revolutions and masses can be controlled or rather enlightened and educated. I decided, then, I would have taken up a cause: from that moment ahead, I would have studied hard and committed myself to connect people to each other through my words. It still was not enough, for speeches of remarkable words can be void of meaning if they do not go alongside with something else. I could not see that “something else” while I was planning my mission, because I was defining the “how” but not the “why”. I was in an uncharted territory trying and creating a pattern where no solution seemed to be palatable. Therefore I changed perspective, and the answer was straight as an arrow: I could not plan my “why” I just needed to find it; then, that posed another challenge: where to find it.

As I state at the beginning of this speech, I like dealing with people, therefore I shifted my focus to the people to find my “why”. My university experience allowed me to live far from the small village where I was born and bred. There I had the chance to debunk a lot of my misconceptions about people, to explore different communities, to see how they could merge together in the daily life of a big city. How they coexist within the same land without

actually sharing much and remaining profoundly divided, and I realised that something is missing.

In 2017 I started to passionately follow the story of Saroo Brierly. I learned about him only when the movie “Lion” based on his life was released. He is an Indian man who as a child was adopted by an Australian family, and saved from the chaotic streets of Calcutta; he has always remembered his natural family and pledged himself to come back and seek them in due time. The movie “Lion” was reviewed by Shane Slater - from the Awards Circuit - as *a triumphant celebration of the beauty of the human spirit*, and received six Oscar nominations. I watched all the footage at the disposal of internet users: of cast’s interviews, press conferences and Q&As that the actors together with the real family did to promote the movie; and what Saroo’s adoptive mother said at the end of one of those, it deeply touched me. A woman asked her: *how could we encourage future filmmakers to write stories like this one that are able to give hope?* She answered: *I think we are ready for encouragements globally, but the thing is, we talk a lot about diversity in populations and so forth but in some ways, we got the diversity and we have no harmony.* I was still searching for my “why” and those mere words made all the pieces suddenly come together, and once again the answer was right before me: my “why” is to help building a more united humankind.

My unwavering belief is that studying interpreting just provides the means, but the aim should be promoting harmony across diversities. As interpreters we are the bridge between several realities, the mean everybody could resort to when their freedom of speech is at stake. Since we should use our knowledge in the services of others, we should not allow our opinions to take over their rights, not that what we think is not important, but for us to have a greater responsibility, something that goes beyond individual needs or certainties. We all deserve a voice which speaks every existing language to truly understand each other, as every message needs to be conveyed in its every facet.

In order for us to carry out this task, we need to master an unbiased and sympathetic spirit, which could mean getting rid of our deepest fears. Usually, we are afraid of what makes us feel uncomfortable, what seems to be out of our control, what we are not used to. It could be something that forces you out of the comfort zone, like speaking in public, dealing with

foreign languages, living in a different place, getting closer to different people; but freedom is on the other side of fear and so is harmony. Fear can lead to closeness and it could be divisive, could turn into a breeding ground for prejudice. Instead of fuelling it, we should have the courage to be open to what we do not know, to be open to people and respect each and every person's uniqueness, so that we will unleash our full potential first and foremost as human beings and come all together to face the threatening challenges of our changing world.

I cannot make the world a better place working as interpreter, but as a person who is willing to use her skills and knowledge to help others, to give her voice to them and make every story heard, and every person count, I know I can achieve "something else", some sort of harmony that is worth living for and living in. Thank you.