

Photo by Chelsea Staver

In Search of HOPE

Documentarian Dianne Whelan weaves connection across 14,900 miles of Canadian wilderness.

By **Gigi Roddick**

Surrounded by a couple acres of matted green forest and birdsong lies Dianne Whelan's home, only a few miles from the bobbing marina ramps and lichened docks that dot the Strait of Georgia in British Columbia, Canada. From the coastline land extends in ripples of sun-bleached peaks and shaded gullies, into which Whelan descends to escape the day's heat.

She travels through ancient trees and thick thatchings of ferns, joined by her goldendoodle, Cedar. Together they skirt round the small lake abutting her property, stopping briefly so Whelan can recline on a warm rock to meditate. Eventually the pair reemerges from the treeline to a sunny backyard and a clear blue sky. Whelan heads for her rustic barn-turned-studio and Cedar follows, contentedly flopping onto the smooth stones surrounding its wood-burning fireplace.

Inside, the small building bursts with ephemera from Whelan's storied career — stacks of spiral notebooks penned cover to cover, a paddle carved with the image of a hummingbird, a fridge magnet of Johnny Cash. High on the wall is a poster for her latest documentary, 500 Days in the Wild. It shows the outline of Whelan with a backpack and a straw hat, backlit by a roaring orange sunset. The film followed Whelan's 14,900 mile journey on the Trans Canada Trail. Hiking, biking, snowshoeing, and canoeing, she crossed between the Atlantic, Arctic, and Pacific ocean in six years.

The thread of her travels doubles back over thin strips of land where she portaged her canoe and gear over muggy wetlands. To the north, it spills out with the silt of the Mackenzie River, where Whelan paddled over 1,200 miles to reach the Arctic. Oftentimes, the thread spools leisurely around the homes of strangers who offered her something warm to eat, or a place to rest along the way.

Upon closer inspection, Whelan has built a web extending decades beyond the markings of the Trans Canada Trail. Before it, in 2009, she joined Canadian rangers snowmobiling through the northern desert of Nunavut for her documentary This Land, and in 2010 she spent a climbing season at 17,598 feet to document the culture of Everest in 40 Days at Basecamp. Even then, on the slopes of the world's highest peak, a thread cut back through continents and time to a photo, soft in the creases, of Edmund Hilary and Tenzing Norgay that an adolescent Whelan stashed in her copy of *The Hobbit*.

Trace the thread further to Whelan, age 5, adventuring through her backyard. In the wet carpet of British Columbia rested ponds, and in them floated pearly clouds flecked with the very minutiae of development. During the temperate heat of late summer, beneath Whelan's peering reflection, these eggy clusters hatched into tadpoles and from tadpoles became frogs. Each day spent crouched over the muddy water revealed more inexplicable development — the firming of back legs from pulpy green flesh, the magical opening of big black eyes.

"I'm a witness to even the smallest things showing incredible intelligence," she says. "Watching a spider weave a web, watching a caterpillar become a butterfly. These are all incredible things. So for me, all life is sacred."

Her version of sacred does not involve peddling religious pedagogy, though occasionally her reverence mirrors that of a preacher. Her free spirit isn't embellished with tie-dye, but rather recognizable by a beaded eagle feather and an email sign-off instructing recipients to "shine on." She's undeniably hearty. As a baby, her mother used to bundle her up in a stroller and leave her on the porch of their Toronto home. Even in the dead of winter, putting her outside was the only way to stop her from crying.

Her adolescence blossomed with wonder and exploration. At school she excelled, completing high school before earning a degree in philosophy and political science from McGill University. But her law school plans changed when she came out as gay in her early 20s. The experience was difficult and cast much of her life into limbo. She turned to nature, mountain biking down to Mexico to increase her health and formulate a new path. She settled on studying journalism at Langara College, largely thanks to her love of writing.

Ultimately, it was photography that caught her eye. She first picked up a camera to cover an anti-war rally for a reporting assignment. Though the task was a basic requisite, as soon as Whelan tucked herself behind the lens, she relinquished her grasp on time and space entirely.

"Eight hours went by, and I thought it was like ten seconds," she says. "I'd dropped into the zone where I suddenly found myself completely enraptured by what I was doing, which was basically narrative and visual storytelling. I loved it — I just got addicted to it."

Whelan chased the high up to the ski town of Whistler, B.C., dropping out of college a month before graduation. Working as a feature writer, photographer, and darkroom technician for a community newspaper, the *Whistler Question*,

Photos by David Astorga



Dianne Whelan sits in front of her studio on the Sunshine Coast in Canada.

she shot hundreds of rolls of film a month. As she experimented with framing, lenses, and souping, her storytelling developed around the visual communication of a photo. The job's poor pay was supplemented by a priceless feeling of awe and purpose.

"When you really love something you're not going to be measuring your hours by how much you make an hour. There's something deeper and more profound happening to you," she says. "I've just chased that. I've spent my whole life chasing that."

Storytelling isn't just about entertainment for Whelan. It is an act of healing — for others, the world, and herself. In 2015, Whelan's marriage of 13 years ended, followed soon after by the death of her 16-year-old dog. Stripped of the pillars defining her adult life, she felt disconnected and unhappy. Amongst her friends and peers she saw a similar discontent, one that reflected the overwhelming despair often plastering the front page of newspapers. Whelan was all too familiar. During her journalism education, 'if it bleeds it leads' was a phrase repeated ad nauseam, referring to the practice of running the most violent and unpleasant stories to attract the most attention. Now she witnessed its effects in headlines that bred a culture of fear, in which everything and everyone appeared threatening.

In the midst of turmoil, Whelan returned to storytelling in hopes that its meditative rapture would deliver meaning and clarity. The Trans Canada Trail, a loose idea that had rested in the back of her mind for years, resurfaced as a canvas on which she could display her emotional journey. She hardly considered the record-setting potential of her pilgrimage — upon reaching the trail's western terminus, she became the first person to ever complete the Trans Canada in its entirety. Now, mention of the accolade brings pause.

She's honored in a begrudging sort of way, distantly able to understand why her finishing before anyone else is impressive to most people. But while on Everest, she watched climbers storm the mountain like a ballooned parade of obscure Guinness World Record attempters, each with hyper-personalized claims to 'first.' Amongst so many people waging conquest on the earth's extremes, Whelan couldn't help but wonder if walking with the land might offer a more profound experience.

Her curiosity challenged one of the few conventional comforts she'd permitted on the trail: her schedule. Starting out from St. Johns, Newfoundland, Whelan possessed a daily mileage schedule and a plan to complete the Trans Canada in only 500 days. It wasn't long before the realities of heavy gear, rough terrain, and the slow art of noticing proved themselves soundly incompatible to her goal. On the tenth day, having not completed the mileage she'd planned to do in three, she burnt her schedule. For the rest of her journey, each movement from when she unzipped her tent in the mornings to when she put out her fire at night was a practice in patience, intention, and relinquished control.

"I wasn't the boss. I didn't go out there to conquer anything. I went out there to live with something, which was nature," she says, "and nature's the boss."

Nature certainly had the upper hand when it froze the lake on which Whelan paddled and demanded she be rescued from the remote Ontario woods. It was nature whose sharp elements tore through four of her tents over 600 miles, and who blew her offshore into the choppy whitewater of Bras d'Or Lake. Following the Mackenzie River northwards in 2019, Whelan was reminded once again of the vast and omnipotent land on which she traveled.

This time she wasn't alone. Joining Whelan's Arctic-bound paddle was her partner, Louisa Robinson, and a frigid third — a black, 12-gauge shotgun that kept vigilant post at the foot of their tent. Tepid as its company was, there proved few other options for companionship. In the four months Whelan and Robsinon traveled northbound, they didn't meet a single other paddler.

Good news had awaited their arrival at Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories. A week behind them, kayaker and fellow documentarian Thomas Destailleur was beginning his journey. Like Whelan and Robinson, he was also headed to the remote Arctic town of Tuktoyaktuk, almost 1,000 miles away. It seemed inevitable their paths would eventually cross downriver.

But it was not to be. On August 6, an off-shore wind blew on Great Slave Lake. Though the gentle waves appeared harmless, Whelan knew how quickly the breeze could sweep paddlers out to deeper and rougher water. Rather than risk it, the pair spent the day resting and continued their voyage the next morning.

As they departed, the Royal Canadian Air Force and Canadian Coast Guard were responding to calls of a missing paddler. The search effort revealed an overturned kayak and the body of 30-year-old Destailleur, who drowned three miles behind Whelan and Robinson.

Less than three weeks later, Whelan's satellite phone received a message from her producer, Betsy Carson. She informed them that a man canoeing ahead of them, a composer named Julien Gauthier, had been dragged from his tent and fatally mauled by a bear.

"It just made everything so real and so raw," Robinson recounted in 500 Days in the Wild.

For Whelan, the news signified a profound change in the journey's vibration. Until that point, her trip had been unblemished by injury or illness. As tragedy bracketed both sides of the river, the couple's vulnerable reality became impossible to ignore.

Whelan and Robinson paddled 30 miles a day towards the Arctic. Rapids laced the water, intent on luring their canoe to its freezing depths. When dusk forced them ashore, they camped on isolated silt bars. They strung the banks with trip wire, and built great pyres against the falling darkness — passing hunters advised it would help in keeping the bears away.

"Fear is your friend," says Whelan. "But panic will kill you."

To avoid hysteria, she leaned on the teachings of Indigenous Mi'kmaq elder and friend, Danny Paul. They met in Nova Scotia during filming for Whelan's unfinished documentary, The White Raven. Regarding the Trans Canada Trail, he emphasized traveling with intention and reverence, encapsulated by the phrase "the earth is sacred, the water is sacred."

Deep in the Canadian wilderness, amidst river rapids, bears, and winter's approaching chill, staying grounded and alert defined survival. Whelan murmured the words with each paddle stroke, refocusing her mind away from panic and towards self control. After hundreds of miles of repetition, the phrase connected her to the land and to the web of life mapping its surface: moose fording streams, their hooves clicking over fat stones, lazy otters sunning on warm logs, the green brush strokes of northern lights over dark skies. Balancing sensibility with reverence, Whelan regained a sense of home in nature. She and Robinson reached the Arctic Ocean in early October, just ahead of the winter's first snowstorm.

Whelan reached the shores of Vancouver Island, B.C., in August of 2021, marking the end of her time on the Trans Canada Trail. In addition to her own strength and resilience, she also attributes much of her success to the people she met along the way. Strangers welcomed her into their homes, offering gear replacements and hot showers, Indigenous communities graciously invited her to listen and learn, and hunters she met on back roads offered fresh meat and directions. Over 14,900 miles, a personal search for hope became a lived testament to human kindness. And with 500 Days in the Wild, she had a way to share it.

"That's really what an artist does," says Whelan. "It's searching for meaning in your culture, you know. Any culture — any group of people — is really held together by a shared story. And stories can change."

Whelan's upcoming project, a theatrical nature documentary titled "Flight of the Puffins," continues weaving connection alongside her awe of nature. The lives of puffins are defined much like peoples' — by the themes of love, resilience, and survival. She hopes the film serves as a gentle reminder of humans' place in the beautiful, ancient fabric of animals, plants, land, water, and air.

"This is what we all share: a living planet, a home," she says. "This is Eden."