

# Maureen Douglas — tweaking the Whistler story

*"When we quit thinking about ourselves and our own self-preservation, we undergo a truly heroic transformation of consciousness."*

- Joseph Campbell

She thinks it's high time we all had a conversation about the future. But not just about Whistler's future. It's time, she says, to talk about just how important the Sea to Sky corridor — and more specifically our sister communities, Pemberton and Squamish — have become in the overall "Whistler experience."



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Indeed, according to local facilitator and event guru Maureen Douglas, Whistler's future success will be predicated on how well the three corridor communities learn to work together in the coming years. "We need to re-invigorate our story," she says. "We need to get rid of old assumptions. Whistler — as big brother — has to acknowledge how much of a positive impact these two neighbouring towns are having on the resort."

She sighs. Laughs. "It makes me crazy sometimes to see the lack of understanding of how interdependent we are. I mean, if we're looking for the heart and soul — the authentic personality of 21st century Whistler — well, then we have to extend our borders north and south."

She lets a beat go by. "What's the Whistler 'personality' today? Does it mean people living specifically in Whistler? I'm not sure that applies anymore."

She says she has no patience for the kind of tension that exists between the three communities. "We're all brothers and sisters," she insists. "Whistler can't deal with Pemberton and Squamish as ugly sisters anymore."

Funny Maureen should say that. For there was Mayor Nancy, just last month, "critiquing" the Garibaldi at Squamish (G@S) resort project during the Union of BC Municipalities gathering. Which begs the question: Is that really her business? Imagine the uproar in Whistler were the Squamish mayor to comment publicly over concerns he had about the viability of WB's planned lifts in Blackcomb Glacier Provincial Park. Think about it.

It's almost like the whine of a spoiled child. "Don't help little brother, daddy, because I was the first-born and you know mommy always loved me best." But I digress...

The way forward for Whistler, argues Douglas, is to be *inclusive* rather than exclusive. "I've lived and worked in the corridor for the last two-and-a-half decades," says the proud Pemberton resident. "And they've been really interesting years." She stops for a moment. Searches for just the right words. "But now, I think, some of us can't see the forest for the trees. That's why it's time to shake things up a bit." She shrugs. "I mean, the moment we start to share the incredible diversity of experiences found throughout Sea to Sky — and I mean really share them — well, I think then we'll be unbeatable!" She laughs. "It's just a matter of tweaking the conversation... from talking about 'just Whistler' to including the whole corridor."

But isn't this just more navel gazing? Hasn't Whistler done enough of that in past years?

"Navel gazing?," ponders Douglas. "Maybe. But we have to face the fact that we don't have a unifying vision anymore. Many people feel that Whistler now sells an 'infrastructure experience.' And up till now, that's worked for us. But what about the future? What about the increasing number of people seeking a more contemplative, less aggressive, less rushed interaction with nature? For example, when was the last time we asked people what they were *really* looking for in a 'mountain holiday?' Or even more radically — what if we asked people: 'if you could wave a magic wand and re-invent Whistler, what would it look like based on your needs and desires?'"

A couple of beats go by. "Wouldn't that be a fun exercise to go through?" she asks. And laughs some more. "I'm not dismissing all the things Whistler has become famous for — the lifts and runs and fabulous restaurants..." She smiles. "But maybe it's time to move beyond just selling adrenaline."

Even, she insists, if that's too scary a concept for many Whistler locals to contemplate. "Change is the one constant in life," she says. "Sometimes you just have to stop what you're doing, look around and figure out who you've become and where you're going in the next twenty years." She pauses for effect. "And if you consider that navel gazing, well then, I'm all for it..."

Anyone familiar with Maureen Douglas — "Mo" to friends and colleagues — knows just how much positive energy the fortysomething mom exudes. "I've always been a half-glass-full kind of person," she admits. "In fact, the glass is usually brimming over." She laughs, another common occurrence in a Mo Douglas

conversation. "I can't help it," she explains. "It's just hard-wired in me — I've been like that all my life. I mostly see the upside to things..."

She was born in Vancouver. "We lived at Main and 18th," she says. "And other than a couple of school-sponsored trips to the north shore, skiing was not part of my world while I was growing up." But theatre was... in a big way. "I went to university on Vancouver Island," she tells me. And laughs some more. "I studied theatre management there. Really practical, eh?"

Maureen graduated in 1985 — and immediately landed a job as head house manager with the Vancouver Children's Festival. "It was really glamorous work," she says, tongue held firmly in cheek. "You know, managing stroller parking and post-show diaper retrievals under the stands..."

But her world was about to experience a seismic shift. "The next year," she says, "Cirque du Soleil made their first trip out west and I was hired as the liaison between the Cirque and the Children's Festival. What an education! Their production values, their organization... wow! It was just so inspiring." That's when it happened; during the Cirque's teardown, Maureen was asked to help move a massive freezer. "The next thing I know, I'm lying flat out in front of the Planetarium with my leg crushed..."

Ouch. "This was a life-changing moment for me," she says. In fact, the injury was way worse than she initially thought. Within six weeks of the accident, the doctors were screwing nails into Maureen's tibia to keep the shattered bone together. "I wasn't going anywhere for a while," she says.

But that was OK. For the world had come to her. "That was the year of Expo 86," she explains, "and there's all this great street theatre happening... some being performed by my friends, of course, but Expo also attracted some serious international talent. It was really cool to see how it transformed the city."

Never short on ideas (and never lacking in *chutzpah*), Maureen was inspired to approach Vancouver Council with her own radically new entertainment proposal. "I remember going to see councillor Carole Taylor about my idea for Gastown and



MAUREEN DOUGLAS

Granville Island and she suggested that it could work if we created some kind of society for street performers." So that's what she did. "It grew pretty quickly," she admits. "Before long we had 25 different performing groups working in the city!"

That's when the Whistler Resort Association came calling. "Mike Hurst ran the association in those days," says Maureen. "And he really wanted us to come up and do our thing at Whistler." She laughs. "You have to remember: we were young and intense urban art programmers in those days. And here was this guy — Hurst — who was really enthusiastic about what we were doing. That was pretty empowering stuff."

The job started small... but developed quickly. "In 1987, we were hired to book street performers for Whistler Village for three days each week — Fridays, Saturdays and Sunday. The next year, we added Thursdays to the entertainment mix. And by 1989, we were booking performers seven days a week."

That was the year the WRA decided to bring the booking job in-house. "So they asked me to write the job description for the new post of 'manager of festivals and events.'" She smiles. "And then they offered me the job."

Skiing wasn't part of her life at that point. But there was something about this youthful mountain town that really resonated with her. "I'd come up to Whistler on a bunch of summer weekends and I started riding my mountain bike around. And my reaction to the place kinda surprised me. 'Oh my god!' I thought, 'I love this place. I love this mix of wild mountains and crazy young people.' Still, I wasn't sure.... Could I live here full-time?"

*Next week: Maureen moves to Whistler, cranks up the public entertainment dial, launches Cornucopia and becomes the public face of VANOC and the 2010 Games. ■*