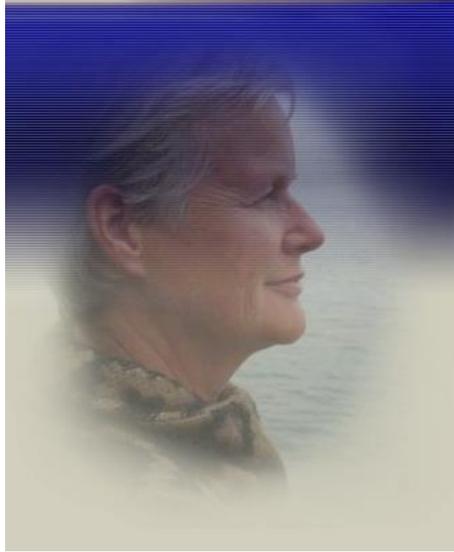


## *Robin's Story – Origins and Influence*



Robin at age 9, taking flight in beloved cedar trees

As a child growing up on a smorgasbord of family stories, I dished myself equal servings of fantasy and reality in the magical, mountainous rainforest of Vancouver, B.C.'s north shore. I pretended I could dig below the roots of the pungent cedars to my mom and grandfather's northern Chinese birthplaces. Why didn't they teach me their Mandarin? I practiced my version of their tongue, making sense to nobody, before giving in to an easy imitation of my maternal grandmother's North Carolina American drawl.

In my friend Jane's cedar house in the cedar woods, we'd serve each other tea with cream and sugar, little fingers raised in our imagined fashion of my English aunt, distant Irish cousins, or especially my paternal Scottish grandmother, twinkly yet ever-so-polite in the cold grey castle she grew up in. There we were, sitting in the forest, our pinkies in the air, giggling away at the absurdity of manners and pretense. I have a clear vision of one time adding spoon after spoon of sugar, way more than the aunts would consider proper, and then plopping in some green peas, which splashed gratifying puddles all over the table.

Finally, we slurped everything down as loudly and rudely as we could.

We whispered about all the possible nasty things my great-grandfather might have done to be banished as a remittance man to Bermuda, forcing my paternal grandfather to be born and raised there. With visions in my head of the portrait of our eighteenth-century aunt, the Polish princess, especially of her big, ruby lips and giant pearl necklace, I'd romp outside in my jeans to swing in the trees. In spite of my irreverence, whether teacher or diplomat, realtor or remittance man, banker or princess, all my ancestors nourished me.

My parents spent two years carving a huge swimming pool out of the steep West Van hillside. Each June, they invited all the neighbourhood children to join my brother, sister and me in a private, water-safety class led by a lifeguard who had us practise artificial respiration. We were then free to somersault off the diving platform, whoosh down the metal slide, swim in and out of the large inner tubes, dive for pennies, pedal the water bike, paddle the kayak or leap in and out of the rubber raft. Not only our neighbourhood, but friends from Toronto, London, Glasgow and New York lounged on the brick patio between flops in the water, gobbling up Mum's hot fresh bread, her salads fresh from the garden and hamburgers cooked in our outdoor barbecue pit in the adjacent lawn. We kids sold tickets for two miles around our home, for a once-every-summer show of our prowess in swimming, magic and jungle gym tricks, afterwards offering games, pop, barbecued goodies, sweets and ice-cream. We gave all the money we earned to the Red Cross, each year raising more and more.

Whenever Vancouver produced cold-enough winters to freeze our slope-sided swimming pool, we'd invite everyone over for games of hockey. Winter Saturdays, Dad drove the family to our cabin on nearby Mt. Seymour, where he cooked all our meals, and traditionally on Sundays, served Mom breakfast in bed. We spent the whole weekend skiing. Saturday nights filled with laughter, stories, singing around his ukulele and often dancing, mostly with German and Austrian immigrants. One of these families came home to live with us for ten years. At Christmas, our house swelled with German bachelors. No doubt, all of these ingredients stirred my lifelong interest in both traveling and teaching English as a Second Language.



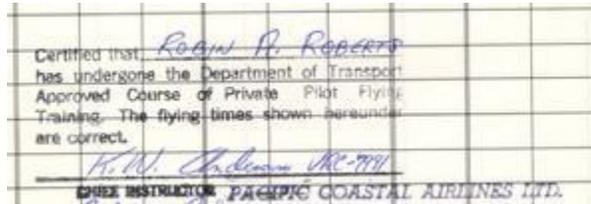
Playing hockey with Dad, brother and neighbours

By generously sharing what they were so fortunately able to create, my parents taught us the true meaning of wealth. We learned to slice through stereotypes, developing a lifelong curiosity about cultural and linguistic differences, healing at our microcosmic level the devastating wounds of World

War II. Mom and Dad's exuberance for the joys of a body kept fit eating wholesome food and playing in the outdoors became my lifelong addictions. Come home to a kitchen of fresh-baked bread and remember Mom's shy smile. Stick my nose in the honey pot and remember hiding in a field of magenta wildflowers near our hives. Squeeze the leaves of a cedar bough in Mt. Douglas Park and recall my giant swing below Mt. Hollyburn. It takes very little to hook me again.



Robin, pondering a flight



Robin's approval to fly

As I bore a bird's name, I dreamt of flying. In 1965, at the age of 18, I fledged from the Canadian nest for a year of French immersion at a university in Switzerland. Enroute home, my uncle introduced me to small planes, flying us in his Cessna from Long Island, New York, to Washington, D.C. Wow: just the two of us, hanging in a cocoon of thin aluminum, our shadow an imperceptible dot 3,000 feet below. I was hooked. Three years after returning to B.C., I had earned not only my elementary teacher's certificate, but also my pilot's licence for single-engine planes.

From the moment I gave up elementary school teaching to manage a yacht design business and live aboard a square-rigged ketch in the American San Juan Islands during the 1970's, my life has revolved around words. Steadily these words, about cruising in remote west-coast seclusion, about the virtues of Japanese-crafted sloops or French-built schooners, about the unraveling of design and boatbuilding mysteries, penned their way to clients' brochures, ads, newsletters, books and international yachting magazines. In August of 1980, the editor of *Sea* magazine asked me to write a five-page feature article on my choice of cruising grounds. Called simply *The "Best" Of Vancouver Island*, he subtitled it *A Cruising Philosopher's Sample*. This philosophical tag defines my approach to writing.



Topsail ketch, "SUNRISE", my home from  
1974 -83



Tutoring SuSie at home in Victoria

In 1983, I sailed out of the yacht-writing life, back to B.C., working more vocally with words for the next couple of decades: tutoring high school and university students on their essay-writing and poetry, teaching ESL to adult immigrants and refugees, and teaching grammar, writing and conversation skills to international students at the University of Victoria. During this time, I wrote book reviews for ESL texts and a manual for teachers on running a highly successful university tutorial program. I stuffed the majority of my written words into a private collection of poems, novels, short stories and travel journals, several of which are now campaigning for a coming-out party.



Our lives metamorphosed as elegantly as a swallowtail butterfly in our rhododendron garden

People say I have lived two separate adult lives: the first thirteen years in a heterosexual relationship birthing a son, with the balance of my adult life in a committed lesbian relationship co-parenting four children and welcoming grandchildren. Metamorphosing along a life journey of such dual nature has taught me how to deal gently and compassionately with my own and others' phobias, and has made me more adept in my ability to educate, whether in person or by pen.



Robin and one-year-old son, 1980

I have had to explain to some Canadians that Libyan, Greek, Venezuelan or German students are neither deaf nor dumb; they need only simpler language for a while. I have told stories illustrating how xenophobia is alive around the world: about my blonde, blue-eyed mother's Chinese neighbours in Andung when she was a little girl, taunting her with "Big Nose" and "Foreign Devil". I have written about the dangers of the fundamentalist religious fringe here in Canada, and in many other countries, shouting that gay and lesbian people like me ought to be lined up and shot. All of this made me, my

partner and seven other B.C. couples join together in an ultimately successful, four-year fight for full equal rights, so that now all Canadians, gay or straight, can marry. Human Rights are about kneading the leavening in the bread of life: without that, we fall flat.



Our wedding invitation, photos age 3 around our garden's ballerina roses

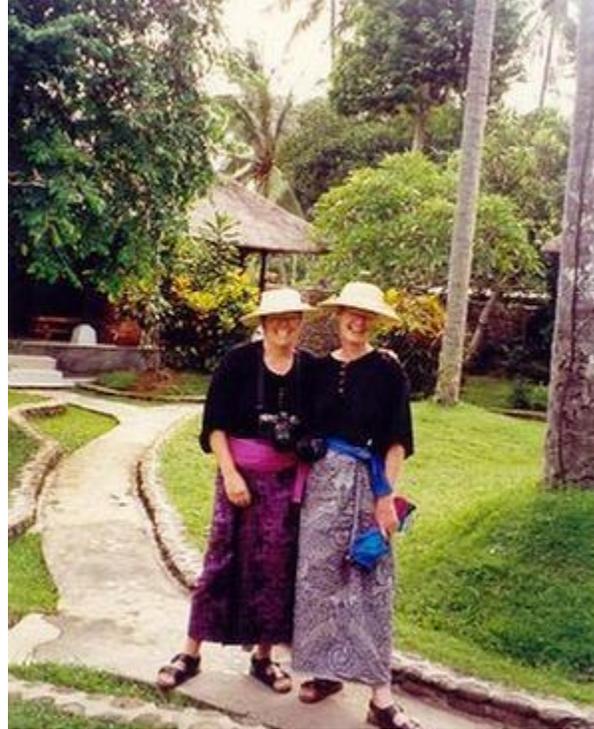


Robin & Diana with sons and daughter around our wedding cake, August 21st, 2004, (on our 21st anniversary)

Curiosity has driven me back and forth several times across North America, taken me cruising in the Caribbean, flown me south to examine luxury yacht construction in Brazil. I wandered for a year with my wife and the two younger of our four children through Europe, Greece and Turkey on a tiny backpacking budget. Years later, we flew to Bali to meet our 18-year-old daughter and ended up going around the world in seven months. Throughout it all, my words danced with me, flowing down the pathways through my body, piling notes on paper, humming in computer files. I believe the best travel writing conducts readers to the orchestra of humanity's differences while drumming everyone's common ground.



Waiting for the Bus, at Molyvos, Lesvos Island, Greece, while backpacking for a year in 1989-90



Relaxing in Bali for 6 weeks, while backpacking around the world in seven months, 1996-7



Diana, Robin & Loki, atop Mt. Doug's Little Summit

My wife and I live a cozy, loving life in Victoria, British Columbia, nourishing our garden, feasting our camera lens upon Himalayan blue poppy blossoms in spring, peachy Chris Evert roses in summer and crinkly, poached egg-like Romneya flowers through autumn. We celebrated our Sapphire Dragon tree's first burst of lavender blossoms in May of 2005, and are now enjoying a Butterfly magnolia in our back deck, while several cedars, camellias, rhododendrons and a large pine tree hold out their arms to embrace our property. We have kept fit by walking first Loki, our Norwegian Elkhound Cross, then Aries, our charcoal Labradoodle, and now Bisous, our apricot Labradoodle, hiking in nearby, 450-acre Mt. Douglas Park, strolling Cadboro Bay Beach, or skirting marshes at Rithet's Bog, Elk Lake or Witty's Lagoon. And what would this smorgasbord of life be, if not integrated with a love of cooking? We try to use as many fresh, organic ingredients as we can either grow or find on nearby farms. What, indeed, is a day without a salad? However, when I bring that first forkful to my lips, I have to laugh at my broken intent. Yes, these greens are local. But the rest is even more mixed in origin than I. Mexican avocados, Greek feta, Portuguese olive oil, Korean sesame oil, French mustard, B.C. garlic, Japanese ginger, Washington apple cider vinegar, California orange juice. Even as it nourishes, life always has a way of humbling me.



What's a day without a salad?



One of our favourite local vistas during walks: Cadboro Bay, Victoria, with Washington State's Olympic Mountains in the distance



Sapphire DragonTree's blossoms in May



Our Chris Evert roses in summer



Himalayan Blue Poppy and Summer Snowflake in May



Romneya Poppy with its poached egg face smiling amongst our Mombretia leaves in September

***Photos by Diana Denny (unless otherwise noted)  
~ All flower photos taken in our garden ~***