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Melinda Camber Porter speaks with Peter Matthiessen on *Men's Lives*, the spirituality of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen, and Native Americans. New York 1987

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By Melinda Camber Porter

"The wilderness itself is full of beauty and also a great mystery and a great silence, a very healing silence. I find it exhilarating, and sometimes it pushes me to the edge of depression. But most of us don't know what to do with it, so we build roads and airstrips into it," said Peter Matthiessen, whose life-long attraction to wilderness has led him on expeditions to South America, Africa, New Guinea, Nepal, and the Sudan, and has brought him into contact with peoples whose way of life precariously awaits the encroachment of modern life, and the threat of annihilation. In *The Cloud Forest, A Chronicle of the South American Wilderness* (Viking, 1961), *Under the Mountain Wall, A Chronicle of Two Seasons in Stone Age New Guinea* (Viking, 1962), and *The Snow Leopard* (Viking, 1978), set in the Tibetan plateau, he searched for himself and his themes far from his home. But for his new book, *Men's Lives* (Random House, 1987), he has chosen to write what he calls an "elegy" on the dying culture of the commercial fishermen of eastern Long Island, where he has made his home for many years.

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Matthiessen ventured into Manhattan to discuss the book and the simultaneous publication of *The Nine-Headed Dragon River* (Shambhala Publications), already feeling homesick for Sagaponick, Long Island. He spoke sadly of *Men's Lives* as a history rather than a polemical work: for polluted waters, legislation favoring amateur fishermen, and the transformation of Long Island into a weekend retreat for New Yorkers has made it impossible for the fishermen to survive. Matthiessen's exhaustive study of the fishermen's lives, illustrated with many remarkable photos, becomes more than a meticulous history when he describes his own experience as a commercial fisherman, and feel for the ocean. As he writes of the destruction of a traditional way of life, he points to a pervasive erosion of values, and landscapes that America needs.

"These people have retained an attitude of life that hasn't been obliterated yet, it's something we once knew too, because they have stayed on the fringes of civilization, for one reason or another, in one way or another. So they hold to ancient holistic views which I feel are very important, and which are shared by American Indians and Zen Buddhists equally. It's something that our society and Europeans in the old days knew too. But I think all the haste and speed of technology of so-called progress has blotted so much of this out. For example, one thing that haunts me is the mystery of the night. We've lost the mystery of the night. There's all this glaring light so you can't see the night anymore. And all the industrial smog has eliminated all the stars except if you go far out. So that if you go to Antarctica or parts of Australia and Africa where there's very little industry you can see stars right down to the horizon.

"But, if you go to real wilderness, where there's no one, no airfields, nothing around you, it's very daunting. It's not a natural place. It sounds pompous, I know, but I think there's nothing there to distract you, it's so unrelenting and maybe it's because you're brought face to face with man's mortal condition. You feel very alone and defenseless not because there are wild animals. You realize what your own fate is and you see your own death and so forth. It may be something like that, it just occurs to me."

Matthiessen believes that the fear of the wilderness is deeply rooted in the American way of life, and has led to a frenzied attempt to tame, and obliterate nature. "I deplore what has happened to the environment, but I can understand it very well. The first settlers came to the East Coast and it was a pretty searing proposition to see that wilderness I'm talking about. They say that the white pines in those days were used for ship masts. They were enormous trees, very beautiful trees. They say the squirrels could have gone from Massachusetts to Mississippi without ever touching the ground and never leaving the white pines. It was vast in size and stature and filled with dangerous wild beasts, and wild men, most of whom were very friendly, but not all. You can understand that they wanted to clear the ground very fast. It was a frenzy of destruction. And they never quite got over the idea of taming the wilderness. It became a national sport."

Matthiessen sees the frontier as the place where the American way was forged, and feels that the weaknesses and qualities of the frontier character operate long after the wilderness has been cleared. Matthiessen was keen to talk of the novel he is currently writing on this theme.

"I'm interested in the violence of the American frontier and how the frontier developed. I hope the novel is a kind of reflection of ...the frontier mind, how it works, where it goes wrong and why this country goes so easily into violence. For we have a lot of violence. I think there is a certain amount of violence that stems from economic desperation. But it's in our character. I think we've idealized it somehow in figures like John Wayne. It's always there, boiling inside us, and it's built into our idea of manhood when we're boys. It's apparent in that easygoing, cowboy mentality. I think Americans are to a degree I'm rather distressed about, I think they are emotional, more or less childish. Maybe emotion isn't quite the right word, but I believe only Americans could have been persuaded nationwide that this aged movie actor would make our leader of the free world. What could have been in our minds? It's an amazing side to our character. You couldn't claim that we were swept off our feet by a demagogue. We were swept off our feet by old cornball Hollywood jokes and a nice friendly chuckle."

The rugged individualism of the frontier days, the ready violence, and the habit of taking the law into one's own hands was so aptly encapsulated in a recent story of murder and reprisal in Florida's Everglades that Matthiessen was inspired to use the material as the basis for his new novel. "The protagonist in my book never killed people for gain. He thought he was right. Because he was faced with what he considered to be 'evil people' -- people whom he saw to be threatening him in some way. They were getting in his way. He was very defensive, he had a short fuse. I don't know exactly how many people this man killed. But he was, by all reports, a very good father and husband, and married three times, a very good farmer, good neighbor, who pitched in. And his neighbors executed him. But they were probably right to under the circumstances, he didn't have much choice. But there were so

many unanswered questions. The case was never brought to trial even though everybody knew what had happened including the sheriff. That was what intrigued me. Because there were those reverberations - that I have been talking about - a childish response to a childish man. There was another instance of a guy in Montana who shot two wardens who caught him with a beaver and pelts. And the whole state is for him. They love him. Yet, in fact, he's a not very stable young man who killed two wardens. And he was wrong."

But for Matthiessen the continuing battle of the frontier is being lost: for the old frontier virtues that were acquired are now dangerously inept, and the loss of American Indian wisdoms has left a void in the mind of America. Matthiessen sees in the American Indian holistic teachings and practices a similarity with the Zen and Taoist insight he has written of in *The Snow Leopard* and the just published collection of Zen journals, *The Nine-Headed Dragon River*. He intends to do a study showing the common heritage of these various spiritual traditions, but he says that his voluminous notes on the subject are still "a wasteland." He has, however, pruned and harmoniously arranged the notes that he began taking in 1969 when his late wife, Deborah Love, introduced him to her Zen masters and the practice of *Zazen* (sitting Zen). Matthiessen takes us on his pilgrimage to Nepal (already described in *The Snow Leopard*) and then to the shrines of Japan, which he visited as a Zen monk in 1982. And in the process he gives us a history of Zen and a sense of the arduous and illuminating inner journey that he embarked on. Matthiessen's ability to understate, his dislike of grandiloquence, and his precise sensitivity towards nature help him to write about such daunting matters with convincing lucidity. I asked him whether the Zen, Tibetan Buddhist, and American Indian practices quell

individuality and oblige one to become subservient to a doctrine and the ways of a group.

"Well, it's surprising. In one sense, you do lose your ego. You lose the idea of yourself as a separate 'I' with a separate name and identity. At the same time, you gain an enormous sense of self, and enormous confidence, and the one thing that really encourages your sense of confidence is that you trust in your own judgment, and you won't be led around by the nose by other people, by trying to please people. So it's a paradoxical situation. Something very mysterious happens when you start seeing the world in this way. For example, if you go to the shore and watch a huge flock of what we call sandpipers, the little birds that are almost all white underneath and darker, greyer brown in the back. And they fly in migratory groups, flocks. Thousands of them. And if a falcon comes and scares them off the sand, they make these enormous maneuvers, these evasion tactics. The whole flock will go straight up in the air, and downwind, and then back. And it's wonderful to watch because they're all white on one side, and the other way, they're dark -- dark/white, dark/white. And then you see that because of the density of the flock these birds must be flying within inches of each other and you couldn't have one bird up front saying 'Everyone to the right, everyone to the left': Because it would be chaos. They'd all be fighting each other, dropping like flies. They don't. Something else takes over, a common soul. They are one organism."

Matthiessen suggests that the lessons to be gleaned from the frontier days are in need of a fresh reassessment. For the holistic ways of the American Indian, and of the Zen masters, encourage a respect for nature and a capacity for peaceful

coexistence. The rugged individualism that actually triumphed in the States has led to many of the political and environmental errors that have been made.

"In many early societies, individuals were completely dependent on one another. Each individual was only a hunting animal, really. For example, you had a group of people on the African plain. The hunter was actually a group of eighteen men. He wasn't one man. One man alone couldn't stand up to any of those dangers. But eighteen could. They're a unit, a social unit. I'm sure this force stems back to the time when we hadn't developed any real society, but were just surviving animals. And one thing I've noticed and never read about is that in very severe weather, birds that are solitary by nature, flock together. Snipe which are scattered throughout the marsh -- you never see two snipe together, never -- but in cold weather, zero and below, I've seen a bunch of snipe way out on an open piece of land where it would never normally go, just bunched together."

But surely they huddle together to keep warm? "Well, if you look carefully, you see that they're not that close together. They just seem to be in more of an association. It's as if their survival lay in abandoning their identity as individual birds. But the same birds will land on the strand and rush their neighbors and crowd them for the last bit of food. So at times, they act in an ego-ridden way. But when in flight - - for instance, during the actual migration flight -- they have to be well coordinated and act as one."

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