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Tibetan Nomads, Remote in a Remote Land

By JAMES ESTRIN April 22, 2010

“I have such admiration for people who just live off the land and people that are self-sufficient,” Alison Wright said, explaining why she has been focusing for the last five years on nomads in remote areas of Tibet.

Ms. Wright, 46, a freelance photographer for National Geographic and many other publications, has documented Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora for more than two decades. Her books include “Faces of Hope: Children of a Changing World,” “A Simple Monk: Writings on His Holiness the Dalai Lama,” “The Spirit of Tibet: Portrait of a Culture in Exile” and “Learning to Breathe: One Woman’s Journey of Spirit and Survival.”

She spoke with James Estrin last week by telephone. Their exchange has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Why were you attracted to the Tibetan nomads?

There’s a real visual beauty about them. Not to be a romantic pastoralist, but you see this woman walking down the street with a waterfall of amber and turquoise and carrying a bag of cement or something. The issue for me is how much they have really endured — not only the difficulty of living on the land — with the Chinese coming in and telling them how they can live and where they should live, having their land taken away and now having to seek out a whole other way of living. They’re being forced to leave the land, to no longer be nomadic and to move to the city.

How did you first meet these people? How did you first get to Tibet?

I got an assignment to go to Nepal to shoot a project there. I was amazed to discover that there was almost more of Tibetan culture living outside Tibet than in Tibet. There were 120,000 Tibetan refugees living in Nepal, India and Bhuttan. So, the project I was working on in Nepal turned into a four-year project. There are 57 settlements through India and Nepal and I went to practically all of them, interviewing and photographing

Tibetans. I was amazed by their strength and their tenacity, their resiliency.

I was just so taken by Nepal, and felt like I had really come home. I didn't want to leave. So the head of Unicef created a project for me, photographing children, for the Convention on the Rights of the Child. I started working for other aid agencies and freelancing with Time magazine. The years just passed. I stayed on. I still continue to go back to Tibet every year.

What year did you first go there?

1988. I've been going there nearly every year since. That's when I first met the Dalai Lama. I was curious about what makes a culture a culture. I mean these people don't have a country. Tibet is not officially a country anymore. But they are still Tibetan. So, these people were really between a rock and a hard place. They couldn't get passports.

How did you meet the Dalai Lama?

This was before he won the Nobel Peace Prize in '89. He wasn't as famous as he is now. He was sort of sequestered in his home in Dharamsala, India. Because I was going to all these Tibetan settlements, his secretary actually called *me* and said: "We heard about what you were doing. We're especially interested in what you're seeing among the next generation." He spent the whole day with me. It was amazing. He gave me a Tibetan name; he gave me gifts and I interviewed him. I was sponsoring a little Tibetan girl and I ended up spending six weeks there doing interviews and spending time with her. I would go back over the years and see him. Every time, he would remember me. He invited me to travel with him. It just turned into friendship. But it was funny when I first met him. I sent this picture back to my parents. I was really proud and said, "Look — here's the Dalai Lama." All my parents know is that I went for a three-week assignment and didn't come back for years. And then they see this picture with me and this bald guy with his monk robe. My mom is like: "Oh, my God. She's joined a cult. So, go over and get her." And he did. My father and my brother came over to do this rescue mission, which was really funny. I think the Dalai Lama's 76 now. And I really fear for that country when he's not here.

What do you mean?

These people are just going to be put into a museum, which is really sad. There are these little "Tibet Museums." They're like Tibetans in a home. It's so creepy. People pay money. It's like, "Look at the Tibetan, sitting there with the yak, get your picture taken with him." I mean, it's a human zoo.

Is that true for the nomads, too?

When you're out in the plains, you realize that these nomads aren't going to be around for even another generation. The Chinese are creating these fences now so the yak can't

graze any further. The nomadic people live in these wonderful sort of yak-hair tents and they're now being forced to live in these concrete structures in the cities.

How has the culture changed in Tibet? How has the practice of religion changed?

Well over 6,000 monasteries were destroyed by the Chinese when they came in. After they destroyed the monasteries, they saw that tourists really want to come to them, so they started to rebuild some of the monasteries. Every monk I have talked to said that the Chinese have planted people in the monasteries. You're absolutely forbidden to show pictures of the Dalai Lama there. I know Tibetans who, in their homes, have this picture of Mao on the wall. And they will flip it over on the other side, and it's a picture of the Dalai Lama. You know, very secret. It's the older people. The younger people, they're not as aware of the Dalai Lama.

When did you start turning to the nomads specifically, or did you always photograph them?

I was going to Lhasa and I would see these nomads. They have such a presence. I mean, these are guys that have a swagger. They're big, tall and have that big yellow-tassel braid. They have these knives. They just have such a presence. Like pirates or something. So, I was just always taken by them.

How did you start going to the remote places where the nomads live?

I got into the countryside when I first went there, back in '88. But then I really started going more — reaching out in the Tibetan plateau — about five years after that. You didn't have to go in a group. I just got a car and a driver and I would drive into there, it's so remote. I would stop at little Tibetan towns along the way. They didn't have all these checkpoints that they have in central Tibet.

You wrote a book called “Learning To Breathe” about your accident, recovery and how it changed your life. Tell me about the accident.

I was shooting in Laos and I jumped on this bus down in the south. I saw a logging truck coming towards us and then it just slammed into us. Our bus was coming right around a corner and I was right on the point of impact and it just sheared our bus in half and sandwiched me between these seats. Some people were killed. I broke my back, my pelvis, all my ribs. My arm was completely shattered. Most alarming, my lungs had collapsed and I had major internal injuries: ruptured spleen, herniated heart. So I was in very bad shape.

Some people, after an hour or so, dragged me off to a little village about an hour away.

This young man — who I later found out was not a doctor or even a nurse — sewed up my arm with a needle and thread. No painkillers or anesthesia. That stopped the bleeding of my arm, which saved my life, but was just the most insane pain I can ever imagine.

They really had no hospitals and no medical care. It was a very humbling experience to realize that no matter how many credit cards or how much money you have in your pocket, you're stuck — just like everybody else. There was a point where I realized that I was not going to get out of the situation alive. They didn't know where to take me and I was lying there for 10 hours. And I knew I was not going to make it through the night.

Here was my test. I had spent my whole entire life documenting this human connection around the world, and was really taken with the tenacity of the human spirit. And now here was my test. I wrote a note to my family and I told them how I died, and where I died, and I wanted them to know that I didn't feel alone. I actually felt held. And I didn't feel fear, something I actually never knew about myself.

But it *wasn't* my time. There was this British aid worker who just happened to be driving by. He was pretty drunk, as it was New Year's. He said, "I'm gonna get you out of here." And you know, bless his heart, he did. He drove me eight hours, in the back of a pickup truck, to Thailand. I really wouldn't be having this conversation right now if it weren't for him.

We couldn't even get to Bangkok. There was one little hospital with only one doctor there. When he showed me the X-ray, he said: "Wow, I've never seen anything like this. Your heart is herniated." That's something you don't really want to hear your doctor say. But he managed to save my life. I flatlined and he brought me back, and I spent nearly three weeks in intensive care in Thailand. It was not a good prognosis. There were a number of surgeries over there. And then I was essentially medevaced back to the United States where, again, the doctors were pretty grim with their prognosis, saying I'd probably never walk properly again. I'd lay in bed for months staring at a ceiling on a morphine drip.

I wanted my life back. I really wanted to be out taking pictures. So my goal became to climb Mount Kilimanjaro. When I told that to my doctors, and the psychiatrist, they said I was in denial. They just never thought that I would actually do it. Two years after the accident, I did.

Have you gone back to Laos?

Three years after the accident, I was able to go back to that little area in Laos and thank those people for saving my life and thank that doctor in Thailand. I wrote a book about it called "Learning to Breathe." And it inspired me to start a foundation called Faces of Hope Fund. As a social documentary photographer, you always hope that your pictures will make a difference.

Tell me about the foundation.

What I love about it is I'm able to help people that I photograph in certain situations. I was able to bring five doctors and \$10,000 worth of medical supplies to that little village in Laos that saved my life. And then I was able to raise a few thousand dollars for tents for Haiti. If you feel like you're not doing anything, you just feel despair. My whole thing is that you have to feel hope. You have to show images of hope. You have to make people feel hopeful. And you have to feel it yourself. Because without hope, that's it. There's no point. There's nothing to go on for.

What did the Dalai Lama say to you next time you saw him after your accident? Did you tell him?

Oh my God, he knew. He wrote a beautiful foreword in my book and he actually called me a bodhisattva, someone who is an enlightened being that comes back to enlighten others. I was so touched by that. It made me feel sort of like I was on a mission. I was consumed with that question: Why survive? Why come back? What did I come back for?