**Mill Valley Oral History Program**
***A collaboration between the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library***

# PETER COYOTE

## An Oral History Interview
## Conducted by Joyce Kleiner in 2012

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INTERVIEWER: Joyce Kleiner
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In this thoughtful dialogue, Peter Coyote shares the evolving personal philosophy that underscores his roles as actor, writer, activist and Buddhist lay priest. Peter first encountered Mill Valley in 1959, when he visited Mount Tamalpais on a trip from San Francisco. The memory of the mountain stayed with him and in the early 1960s, Peter returned to the area. For the next 10 to 15 years, Peter moved fluidly back and forth between San Francisco and Marin on his motorcycle. In San Francisco, he pursued theater acting and graduate-level studies in creative writing; in Marin, he spent time on a commune near Point Reyes and took part in the newly-minted rock and roll scene of the "funky little summer town" of Mill Valley. In the mid 1980s, Peter moved his family into a historic home near downtown Mill Valley.

Peter recollects how he became a mover and shaker in the San Francisco counterculture as a member of the Diggers, a radical community-action group. This segued to his becoming chairman for the California Arts Council in the late 1970s, and eventually propelled his acting career into film. In this oral history, Peter focuses heavily on his journey with Buddhism. It is Peter's precise, Buddhist-influenced mindset that resurfaces throughout the interview as he discusses topics including the changing nature of Mill Valley, the importance of local businesses, anarchism and the Occupy movement. Ever-present and engaged, Peter advocates for positive choice and reminds the listener that, "everything you do includes the entire world."

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**Editor's note: This transcript differs in some ways from the audio recording. It has been reviewed by Peter Coyote and Joyce Kleiner, who made minor corrections and clarifications.**

**Joyce Kleiner:** First, thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it. We are going to start with the things that the Oral History Project is most interested in, so the focus is going to be a little more local in the beginning and then we will expand out, hopefully, from you in Mill Valley into you in the world. I specifically got the feedback from David Grossman[1] in the library that really he just wants to hear whatever you want to talk about, but we are all interested in knowing how you came to live here and how long you have been here and your impressions. But first, let's just get some raw data. How about your name? Today is January 17th, 2012. So your name, where we are, and anything you would like to tell me about your personal life, your family, your children, anything like that.

**Peter Coyote:** My name is Peter Coyote. We are sitting in my office and study under my garage in the north facing slope of Coyote Ridge facing Tamalpais. We are midway between the Tamalpais Valley drainage and the Bay drainage. I have a wife, two children by other women, grown. I have a 42-year-old daughter who is PhD psychologist. I have a 27-year-old son who is living in New York. I turned 70 this year. I don't know any 140-year-old people. I have to say, middle age is over. [I'm] trying to accept being an elder with good grace.

**Joyce Kleiner:** I like that word, "elder." Before we talk about how you ended up in Mill Valley, I want to jump in to how you became Peter Coyote, because that wasn't the name you were born with.

**Peter Coyote:** No, it wasn't. That has already been written in detail in my book, but I will cover it.

**Joyce Kleiner:** The only reason I want to cover it is because we don't have an oral record of it.

**Peter Coyote:** I see. Well, when I was about 21, I was in college, Grinnell College in Iowa, and some friends and I sent away to Texas. We bought a box of peyote cactus. We had no idea what it was. The box came about 3-feet long and about 10-inches high and 10-inches wide and it was filled with cactus. We didn't know what to do so we went to the library. In our research, we realized that people took peyote on the Tama Indian Reservation in Poweshiek County, Iowa, which is where we were located. So we drove over there and did a little judicious humphing and fumphing and found a guy who knew about it and gave him half and he told us how to take it. So about six of us were assembled down in a friend's room and we kept eating one cactus after another. Nothing happened. So a friend of mine stood up and said, "I'm going to go, there is nothing going on here." He stood up and said, "Oh wow, my hands are dizzy." The minute he said that, we all went [sound effect] and we were gone. So I went outside and I turned to this fellow who is still one of my closest and oldest friends — really great science fiction novelist,

[1] History Room Librarian at the Mill Valley Public Library from 2006 to 2014.—Ed.

has won every Hugo and Nebula award as a science fiction novelist — I turned to him and I said, "You know something, I have turned into some kind of little wolf, I don't know what it is." I just went dog-trotting off through the island all night long, panting and just running. I sort of came to in a corn field and looked down on the ground and there were all these little tracks which you see carved on my ring here — you might need your glasses because it is really tiny. I was so stoned still I didn't know if I had made them or animals had made them. I wound up there.

So about four years later, I wound up staying with this Shoshone medicine man named Rolling Thunder, famous guy, book written about him. He had come to the Haight Ashbury and he had had a vision that my anarchist family, the Diggers, were the reincarnated souls of Indians killed in the Little Bighorn. What did I know or care, but he was around and he was an interesting guy. I saw some displays of real power on his part, so I went to live with him and fix his trucks and his toilet and run errands for what I could pick up. One night we were rolling a smoke of his native tobacco and I told him about this incident that had happened several years prior and he said, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" I said, "What do you mean, what am I going to do about it?" He said, "Well, the universe opening its mind to you. You have a choice. You can acknowledge it or you can treat it as a hallucination. If you treat it as a hallucination, you will stay a white man. If you acknowledge it, you might just become a human being, with a little work." So he was like that, he is very funny and Indian humor is a lot like that.

So I thought about it for about three or four months and I decided to take the name as a beginning, as an introduction to understanding this. It turned out to be a prescient choice. I couldn't have known it, but it turned out that once I took the name, I was free. Peter Cohon, which was my born name, was completely covered with other people's thoughts and expectations. He had a history, he had things he was supposed to do, he had things he wasn't allowed to do. He was completely enmeshed in a kind of comic constellation. I was no longer that guy. I have been Peter Coyote now more than twice as long as I was Peter Cohon. So I tell people, it is not my born name but it is my real name.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Right. Okay, now as you said, your story of your years through the '60s and into the early '70s —

**Peter Coyote:** Counterculture.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Counterculture is extremely well-documented, it seems, in your book, "Sleeping Where I Fall", so I want to jump ahead for now and then maybe we can go back and pull the strands of it out. I want to come up to the present now, talk about — you live in Mill Valley, so the question is, how long have you lived in Mill Valley, how did you end up here, why did you choose it, and a few questions after that.

**Peter Coyote:** Well, I have lived in Mill Valley continuously since 1984 — I have actually owned property here. But I first came here in 1959. And I lived all over Mill Valley and all over the county since 1964, when I came here. I had a 10-year hiatus in San Francisco Zen Center where I was living at the monastery there. Just before that, I had a few years at my family farm at the Delaware Water Gap area of Pennsylvania. But I have always loved Mill Valley. I first came out here in 1959 when I took a road tour out to see the beatniks in the Coexistence Bagel coffee shop, and came up to see the redwoods and first walked on Mount Tamalpais. I remembered

Mount Tamalpais because two or three years later, I was in London and I had been playing my guitar in the streets and then I went north all the way to the Hebrides and walked, and it was the exact same landscape. These kind of pale, khaki-colored sere grasses blowing in rocky hillsides with fog and ocean below them. I thought it was the most beautiful place I had ever been and when I came back, I remembered Mill Valley — Mount Tamalpais, actually. When I came out here, I was going to school in San Francisco to get my Master's studying creative writing. I used to come out here weekends. I had a motorcycle, it was a great ride and right on Mount Tam. I still have a motorcycle.

**Joyce Kleiner:** What kind of motorcycle do you have?

**Peter Coyote:** A BMW R90S, 1974. Then during the '60s, I had a lot of friends out here and we spent a lot of time in the county. We had a commune in Forest Knolls; I had a commune in Olema, between Olema and Point Reyes. So we were in and out between the city and western Marin all the time. Mill Valley was kind of like a rock and roll haven. The yuppies hadn't invaded. Every hip lawyer, psychiatrist, Silicon Valley type, had not invaded and created a Mill Valley lifestyle where you see photos of slender blonde women in huge hats carrying tufts of flowers with — who was that women, who made those women's dresses that were like *Little House on the Prairie* dresses?

**Joyce Kleiner:** Oh, Laura Ashley.

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah, Laura Ashley, there was none of that kind of revolting stuff that had started yet. It was just like a funky little summer town.

**Joyce Kleiner:** What year would you stamp that?

**Peter Coyote:** '63.[2] Shortly thereafter, the rock and roll invasion happened, and then not so long after that, the urban professional dot com flooded the place with money. But when I came here, Lockwood's Pharmacy was still there where the art gallery is. Jimmy — I have forgotten the name of the family that used to run the 76 station, right in the middle of Miller, across the street from where Whole Foods is — Jimmy and his dad.[3] We had two hardware stores, one where the Old Port is that just closed, and we had one just behind the Depot. It was a town, you know, real people, there were rich people and poor people. Like Petaluma today. It was not so much a slice of economic — what's the word — demographics.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Yeah. That must have been — there were a lot of interesting people living in Mill Valley at that time. You were living up in Olema, but you were hanging out here sometimes, right? What was it like for you as a young man to hang out in Mill Valley in the late '60s? Actually, not even the late '60s, the early '60s —

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah, the early '60s. Well, you know, there were a lot of drugs here — I liked drugs. There were a lot of hipsters, musicians, and a lot of musical people that I knew here.

[2] The correct date is 1964. —Peter Coyote
[3] The Oliveira family. —Peter Coyote

Nobody bothered you. Lots of charming old houses tucked in the trees, beautiful kind of — not Victorian, what is the name for the period where Green and Green —

**Joyce Kleiner:** Oh, Arts and Crafts.

**Peter Coyote:** Arts and Crafts homes, yeah. It was just picturesque and beautiful and calm and quiet and clean and none of the frenzy of the city, and then the mountain was there.

**Joyce Kleiner:** How did the young experimental hipsters get on with the more working class, older generation, second- and third-generation people that had been here already?

**Peter Coyote:** Well, we got along through their children. Like I was talking about this guy Jimmy — Jimmy and his brother — their family ran the 76 station — so they were my age, and we stayed friends until they moved. Jimmy is in Florida now and if I look at my computer I could probably dig up their name. So these people had kids. The Flint brothers from out in Inverness — a lot of old families had kids and the kids wanted to be into the music. They smoked dope or they took acid or whatever was happening. So we maybe looked a little shaggy but we weren't very intimidating and nobody bothered us much. We paid for our coffee, we paid our bills. I didn't sense a lot of antagonism at all.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Sounds like it was a really good time here.

**Peter Coyote:** Great time. I mean, it is still a great place to live. It has just lost its diversity. I mean, I see all these people riding bicycles in Spandex and I think — my wife kills me every time I say this, she says they are just practical clothes — but I think basically people are wearing uniforms to show that they don't *have* to ride bicycles. The people that have to ride bicycles wear khaki pants and sneakers or whatever and they just ride their bicycles. So there is a kind of elitist wash that has spread over Mill Valley where we deserve the best of everything and you can go into Whole Foods, you can get locked in combat over the last organic tomato. So to me, it is kind of like an extension of personal selfishness. But it is still a lovely place to live, and the people who ruined someplace else and moved here actually fall under its spell and eventually get civil.

**Joyce Kleiner:** When did you decide to live here full time and what made you choose it?

**Peter Coyote:** I was living in San Francisco at the Zen Center there and my daughter was enrolled in public school. She was getting mugged for her lunch money at Fillmore and Page Street, Page and Steiner, the Western Addition. The pink palace high rise was there, there was another series of high rises in the neighborhood and I thought, "This is just horse shit, I can't subject my children to this." I had just started my film career, I had my first money, I was about — I don't know — it was 1981, I was 40. So I think, maybe we moved in '84 or '85. We bought a house out here in Mill Valley, a really old house built in 19-6, built by one of the architects of the Golden Gate Bridge on Rose Avenue. My ex-wife still owns that house today. Very beautiful, kind of craftsmanship and work you just don't find in a home. Up there on the streets, named after all the whores from the old brothels, Rose and Ethel, they were all hookers.[4]

[4] While commonly believed, sources show that these streets were named after the daughters of Mill Valley's early developers. —Ed.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Yeah. So you have been here, it has been your house since around 1985?

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah, I bought my first house here in '85, so that was 27 years ago.

**Joyce Kleiner:** I'm going to jump around a little bit to make sure I frontload some of the questions oral history cares the most about. You have written a memoir that the nucleus of it was basically a Pushcart Prize-winning essay that you submitted or had published in —

**Peter Coyote:** *Zzyzzyva*.

**Joyce Kleiner:** I know it and it is a very well-respected literary journal, I just can't say it. So you won the Pushcart Prize out of that essay and then it became out of that and sort of other essays eventually your memoir, *Sleeping Where I Lay*. And that is really —

**Peter Coyote:** *Sleeping Where I Fall*.

**Joyce Kleiner:** — *Where I Fall*. And that is really — so that documents the years of your life until you went into films very well. So I'd like to pick up from where the book ends. You had served on the California Art Commission, you were the chair.

**Peter Coyote:** California Arts Council. The Commission was the one that Jerry Brown abolished and started the new one with Gary Snyder as the chairman. Gary enlisted me to come on board.

**Joyce Kleiner:** You talk about that and what you learned from that and if we have time, we will go back to that because it was very interesting. But you end the story when you decide to get back into film. So I would like to at least get a flavor of what life was like for you after that and what changes occurred to you both professionally and emotionally going into that stage of your life.

**Peter Coyote:** Sure. It is funny, I am just literally writing this right now in the last chapter of my new book.

**Joyce Kleiner:** I was wondering if there was going to be a sequel.

**Peter Coyote:** So okay, here is what happened. I spent 10 to 15 years in the counterculture, and I spent it with a group of people, the Diggers, who did everything anonymously. We didn't use money and our feeling was that if you eschewed wealth and fame, you probably were doing what you wanted to do because you meant it. But it actually caused some problems for the young men with the big egos. So we were pretty widely acknowledged as being the cutting-edge thinkers of the counterculture and we came up with the most innovative ideas and the newest forms to try things, you know, from free stores to free food to free banks to free medical clinics. They were all our invention. We imagined them and we made them real by doing them. But someone like Jerry Garcia could be in my house and he could hear the farthest out thinkers in the counterculture talking and then I might read those remarks in his interview the next day.

**Joyce Kleiner:** As his own?

**Peter Coyote:** As his own, yeah, reworked. I think I would get cross or angry but I thought, "Wait, he didn't take a vow of anonymity, I did, right? He is just being himself and incorporating ideas and songs and snatches of melody wherever he gets them and using them. That is what people do." So I had always felt that as the Diggers, I was sort of sitting on my hands because I was always a charismatic person. For some reason, people wanted to watch me and people were interested in what I did. I don't know why. I'm sure that most people don't, you just come to accept that as a fact. It is a kind of power. I never got a chance to really manifest it, except maybe as a seducer of women or something.

So I got on the California Arts Council and had a huge success. I was the chairman for almost four years. On my watch, the budget rose from a million to $16 million a year. We radically changed California arts politics. I made friends with arts conservatives and liberals and middle-of-the-roaders and put together a lot of coalitions based on skills I had learned in the counterculture. Lack of judgment, lack of ideological fixity, it gave me a lot of confidence to realize I didn't have to stay at the margins of society any longer. I didn't have to just be a hippie in the counterculture, I could move in the big leagues. Or at least I thought I could. So I resolved to give acting a try and I gave myself five years. I said, "I will do it for five years, pedal to the metal, balls to the wall, and if I fail, at least I won't die with the what-if's. I will have tried it. I got lucky. I went back to theater doing plays for two full years, doing plays back-to-back at the Magic Theater to get the rust out and remember how to act. Then I did the world premiere of the Sam Shepherd play *True West*.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Is he still living in Mill Valley?

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah, Sam and Olan were good friends of mine. An agent from Hollywood saw me [in that play], signed me up, was my agent for eight years, [and] took me all the way to the leads in major motion pictures. So that became my life. I had never made more than $2,500 a year until I was about 37. I got a seated job for a while; I was being paid $600 a month — that was a government job to hire artists — so I was making $7,000 a year. All of a sudden, you know, I got a job and I made $10,000 for a week. The first thing I did was go out and buy the best down sleeping bag that money could buy, for me and my wife. She could never be sure.

**Joyce Kleiner:** What movie was the first?

**Peter Coyote:** The first movie was called *Die Laughing*, execrable film with a child star and a monkey.

**Joyce Kleiner:** What year did you do *Jagged Edge*?

**Peter Coyote:** *Jagged Edge* was after *ET*. You can go to my website, which is petercoyote.com, and it will have my entire filmography there, and they know it better than I do.

**Joyce Kleiner:** So you get into movies.

**Peter Coyote:** I get into movies, I start doing movies, I start to make some money, I can buy a house, I can send my kids to school, [and] I can start saving for my retirement. I didn't get my Screen Actors Guild union card until I was 39, and I didn't really make any money until I started to be about 42. Even then, you know, I was never a huge star, so I never made the kind of paychecks that these guys did. But it goes without saying that we are overpaid when we work. It is just that you don't work often. 95 percent of the actors in the Screen Actors Guild are out of work at any given time. The median income is $5,000 a year. So I was extremely lucky. So for, you know, 30 years, I have not had to wait tables or do anything but be an actor and I have supported myself and my kids. Got my kids through school debt free. I still can't retire, but I have managed to live in Mill Valley, Paris, London, I have traveled around the world, and I have gotten a number of the perks of a celebrity. In Europe, I actually approximate a movie star. In America, I am sort of a third-tier celebrity that is firmly lodged in the ranks of character actors.

**Joyce Kleiner:** How many languages do you speak?

**Peter Coyote:** Three. I speak French, Spanish, and English. And more than a little Yiddish, but I am not fluent in it.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Okay. One thing, your book ends on a note of conflict because movies to you represented a corporate culture that you didn't support. Did you find that next stage in your life to be one where you were up against your belief situation? Did you find that you had to be tacking more often?

**Peter Coyote:** I think that you read that wrong.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Okay.

**Peter Coyote:** Initially, it was very hard for me to go into movies and make a success because from the Digger perspective, I looked at it as the entertainment wing of corporate culture. It certainly is true. It is that. You can't make movies without corporate money somehow behind you. But it is a little unnecessarily rigid. I had been sitting zazen; I had been studying Buddhism for about five years by then. You know, the central core of Buddhist principal is that everything is interdependent. There is no independent self; there is nothing in the universe that stands alone even though it appears that way. For instance, if you look at the wood in the arm of that chair, we say, if you look deeply into the wood, you will see the sunlight. Can't have the tree without sunlight, can't have the tree without water, can't have the tree without pollinating insects, birds to control the pollinating insects, out to the entire world.

So I thought to myself, "Well, if the entire world is interdependent, intermixed, it means in effect that there is no pure place that you can stand, which is the problem with the idea of a counterculture. You are not outside it — that is a mental pet." So I thought, "If there is no place pure to stand, it means that every place I am standing is going to be an equal mixture of positive and negative values. So the best thing I can do is just consistently choose the most positive value available to me at any given moment." And that is what I did. So when I made movies, I treated everyone exactly the same way, I didn't differentiate between high and low. I was always on time, I always knew my lines, I worked hard, I didn't compete with the other actors, [and] I practiced my Buddhism through that work. It is true that the movie business has acres and acres

of bullshit about it, but still, so does a Catholic nunnery. There is nothing that humans do that isn't conflicted by greed, hate, and delusion. So I made this decision that if I always chose the most enlightened possibility, I would minimize the harm that I did to others and it would be a field for my work. So it was not like an ideological conflict of values except when I was thinking through "should I do this, can I do this."

**Joyce Kleiner:** In my notes here as I was preparing to talk to you, I actually wrote something about that concept, how Buddhists tell people to take their Buddhism into the world because you aren't really experiencing it if you are hidden and shaded and not exposing yourself to it.

**Peter Coyote:** That is why I am in the lay lineage. My teacher is a lay teacher.

**Joyce Kleiner:** That is what I would like to talk about next.

**Peter Coyote:** Okay.

**Joyce Kleiner:** You just recently got lay ordained.

**Peter Coyote:** No, I was ordained in a lay ordination some time ago. I was just recently ordained as a priest.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Okay, I'd like to get that whole story, if you don't mind. Your interest in Buddhism, your journey through Buddhism, your different ordinations, and then ultimately what you just said and also before I leave, I was wondering if I could see the bib.

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah, I have a rakusu.

**Joyce Kleiner:** But we have a lot of Buddhists in Mill Valley so I would really like to hear about that journey.

**Peter Coyote:** Well, I began reading about Buddhism when I was about 14. I read a book by Phillip Kapleau called *The Three Pillars of Zen* and another couple [of books]. I saw it as kind of — I loved the ideas of it. The ideas responded to the way that I saw the world but I didn't know anything about meditating or practice or any of that stuff. So I read it and I knew everything but I didn't know anything. So around 1972, my friend Danny Rifkin, who used to be the manager of the Grateful Dead, came by the commune on my family farm and he brought this really cute girl with him.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Was this the one on Martha's Vineyard?

**Peter Coyote:** No, on the Delaware waterfront in Pennsylvania. He brought this really cute girl with him that I liked. I chatted with her and was nice to her and when I came back to California, I looked her up and she was living at Zen Center, so I started going to Zen Center and started to actually meditate and sit. But even before that during the '60s, I met Gary Snyder and I came under his influence. He really impressed me with his calm and his scholarship and his equanimity and the level of craft he manifested as a husband, an artist, a carpenter, a community

activity and organizer, and this came from his nine years at a Japanese Zen monastery in Japan. So I began to get very interested in it. But I began to sit in 1975, and I sat with a number of teachers. Then about 10 years ago — and I kept sitting on my own every day — and about 10 years ago, I started to work with Lewis Richmond, who left Zen Center at the time of the big Baker Roshi scandals. He went out and he got a job and worked for Smith and Hawken and then he started his own software company. He sort of embodied something that Gary Snyder had warned me about. Gary Snyder warned me many, many years ago that he always felt that the monastic model was a very bad model for Zen in America, because in Japan when you become a priest, you then leave the monastery and you go take over the monastery of your father or you get a job in a community. But in Zen Center, there is no place for the priests to go. So it sort of became this pressure cooker. It is a lovely institution, I really love it, but it is kind of like a whole bunch of actors who decide acting school is groovy and they stay in acting school. You are not an actor until you get a job. You are not a priest until you go out in the world and take care of people. That is what our vow is, the pledge to take care of laymen. So Lew was starting a lay practice for husbands, housewives, householders, people who were in the world. There was something about his manner that I really appreciated, a kind of nothing special, no hierarchy, no nothing, but deep, profound. I sort of threw my lot with him. About eight or nine years ago, I became lay ordained.

**Joyce Kleiner:** When was that?

**Peter Coyote:** Eight or nine years ago, I don't remember. I was given a Buddhist name and I took the vows of a layman, which is kind of like initiating your formal practice. I had already been practicing 28 or 29 years by then — by the time that I did that. So when I did that, part of doing that was that I had to sew a blue rakusu. So this rakusu — this little bib here is an exact miniature of Buddhist robes. It is made of seven panels and each panel is made of two shorts and a long. Then they are folded under and divided. What they are is they represent the kind of walkways in a rice field.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Oh.

**Peter Coyote:** So this is [like] the robe that we wear over our shoulders. It is the size of a double bed sheet. It is sewn the same way, stitched by hand to very, very precise measurements. Then on the back, my teacher writes my name, Hosho Jishi, dharma-voice, compassion-warrior, and a little poem. This is my name in Japanese and that is his chop.

**Joyce Kleiner:** It means compassionate warrior?

**Peter Coyote:** Dharma-voice, dharma is reality, compassion-warrior. So then last August, I became ordained as a priest.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Through the same order?

**Peter Coyote:** Yes, same order, same name. I had to sew a new rakusu and had to sew my robes. The rakusu is what we wear in place of our robes when our robes are cumbersome, when

we are working, when we are doing something. They have the same kind of sacred authority as the robe, [but] they are just a little more practical.

**Joyce Kleiner:** So as a priest, can you define the difference between the lay ordination and this new definition and how you affect it in the world?

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah. Well, first of all, as a priest, I am legally entitled to marry people. I am taught to run ceremonies: blessing ceremonies, naming ceremonies, blessing space. All of the requirements of taking care of laypeople who may — so I hold ceremonial space for laypeople when some kind of ceremony is required. That is really my job. Because I am a lay practitioner, I don't often wear my robes. We call it invisible robes. I just go through the world until I stumble on somebody or some situation that needs help. The only reason I became a priest was because it is a kind of inherent bias at Zen Center and I thought, "Well, society recognizes that, it will legally allow me to marry people." It doesn't exist in the lay tradition and I thought it might be helpful to people if I was counseling them or if I was doing a ceremony, for them to know that I had been trained.

**Joyce Kleiner:** How do you — what kind of counseling do you find yourself called on to do the most often and how often do you come in to someone's dining room?

**Peter Coyote:** Oh, I have been to about five deaths, I have done maybe four weddings, counseled survivors. You know, it is sort of like people who know me get an idea that I might be able to help them and they ask me. So for instance when supervisor Charles McGlashen died, he was kind of a fan of Buddhism and his wife called and asked me to run the ceremony and so I did and was happy to do that, and spoke with her several times. It is not magic, but if you know what you are doing, you can help people transition from grief to acceptance, let's say. The same thing with a wedding — if you know what you are doing, if you are skillful, you marry the entire community to the bride and the groom and you get them to help support that marriage. To me, it is the best use I have ever found to apply one's charisma to, because it is not selfish, it is actually serving other people.

**Joyce Kleiner:** I like the idea of bringing the entire community into the commitment at a marriage ceremony.

**Peter Coyote:** Just think about it. One of the reasons that we marry in public, why we take these vows in public, is that implicitly, we are asking the community's help — I don't want you to flirt with this woman, I don't want you to flirt with this man. We have made a bond here, we have made these vows in public, you have to help us stay married, you know.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Why do you think there are so many Buddhists in Mill Valley — or Marin I guess, really — but it seems like there are an awful lot in Mill Valley.

**Peter Coyote:** Well, first of all, I think that Buddhism as a religion — well, let's just back up. Buddhism is barely a religion. It has religious aspects to it, but part of it is very important iconography and history that Buddha was an ordinary man. He was an ordinary man. He solved this problem that it feels like I am in here and the rest of it is out there. As long as I feel separate

from it, I am going to need protection, I am going to need armor, I am going to fear gain and loss, [and] I am going to create a turbulent world. So Buddhism is actually a way of practicing living. Many of the things that look religious are actually just expressions of gratitude and thanks. The bowing, appreciation for the teaching. It is not really worshiping a holy enlightened being any more than you might worship Einstein's intellect.

So, there is a kind of flaw in Western European philosophy and world view. I think it kind of comes from the Newtonian view of the world as kind of clockwork machinery where everything is broken up into atomized parts. You break things down, you extract the chemical you want from a plant and you throw away the 40 other chemicals that may buffer its effect. So I think Buddhism has come up with a far more sophisticated explanation of how the world actually works. It corresponds to deep intuitions that people have. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that the world is interconnected. You don't have to be really brilliant to know that if you overtax the carrying capacity of where you live, you are going to ruin it. You don't have to be a brilliant person to look around you and see that people are not happy, that consumption and neoliberalism and communism, capitalism, whatever, are not making people happy, and neither is science. So I think it is the failure, the hollow spot at the center at all these different disciplines and ways of looking at the world that Buddhism fills.

It doesn't matter whether it is Tibetan Buddhism or Vipassana or Zen or Nichiren Shoshu. They are addressing the empty space through which the axle of a wheel is fitted. They are addressing the empty space at the center of Western culture. I think people are gravitating to it as the only answer. Because really, when you read the newspapers or watch politicians on the television, these are just dangerously childish, ambitious, self-serving men and women who are consciously taking positions of great danger and stupidity to win personal power. I mean, people who have no problem trusting science when it builds weapons, but when it tells them that the climate is changing because of too much carbon, suddenly it is questionable. They have no problem trusting science when it builds a jet plane, but when it tells them about evolution, suddenly they act shocked and horrified, and they know better! They know better. So for lack of wisdom, the world is hurling off a precipice, and I think people know it. And people are turning away from their leaders. Congress has an 8 percent approval rating. Gadhafi had more than that! Mubarak had more than that. We talk about dictators. If you have an 8 percent approval rating, it means that 92 percent of the people are being controlled by 8 percent that they don't like.

**Joyce Kleiner:** There was a good quote in your book that I did catch. Question is, can I find it? It was about leadership — someone you were quoting about lessons learned through your experiences in the '60s. Ah, through authority. This was — Ron — what's Ron's last name — Ron and Marsha.

**Peter Coyote:** Thelin.

**Joyce Kleiner:** You quoted him as saying, "I had learned a lot from communal living, Ron admitted, but 25 mph speed limit is a cooperative agreement, it is a tool designed to do certain work. You can't exceed the nature of the tool and call that freedom. Do your own thing made authority impossible, even legitimate authority. We reacted to false authority, which demeans true authority. True authority is skill, insight, and knowledge."

I'm interpreting that to mean that true authority is something that you earn from action, that, you know, makes you worthy of leadership. Is that sort of what you mean?

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah. You know, my dad used to say — my dad was a smart guy — he went to MIT at 15, made a lot of money, made it, lost it all, but made it and kept it for a good run. He used to say, if I was Alexander the Great and had conquered some territory and now I had to go back to Rome, I would call all the men together in the town square and I would say, "I need some people to govern this community for me while I am gone, to keep it in good shape and good order. I would like a list of volunteers." He said, "Then I'd slit the throat of everybody that raised their hand and I would walk around and [ask], 'Who has the happiest children, who has the happiest marriage, who has the best farm, who has the healthiest animals?' And I would say to those people, 'You will rule.'" You have to remember that all of our leaders are basically people who have put themselves forward. There is a huge element of narcissism there. Vote for me. I am the guy. Yet they cater to an uneducated, *de*-educated public that has been victimized by the cheapest kind of journalism, the cheapest kind of reporting, all dedicated to maximizing the profit of corporations. And we are bearing and living in the fruits of that cultural denigration.

**Joyce Kleiner:** This makes me want to jump ahead to my questions about what is going on politically right now, but I am not quite ready to do that yet, so I would like to take what you just said and put a pin in it and wrap up my questions about Mill Valley first, and your involvement here. The first time I saw you here in Mill Valley was — 1997 — there was a forum —

**Peter Coyote:** Take Back Mill Valley.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Yeah. So I was interested to know over the years that you have lived here, in what ways you have been — let's start with that and tell me and the recording what that was, and what other ways you have been involved in local issues here in town.

**Peter Coyote:** I haven't been too involved in local issues because I have spent so much time on the road earning a living. It was my idea, if I remember, to do the big garbage haul out of the creek that ran through Mill Valley. It was something I promoted at the Take Back Mill Valley meeting. I was conscripted, I was asked to join that, and I did and got excited by the idea of Mill Valley coming up with a city plan and a town plan that would really work and make this place greener and easier and less traffic ridden and stuff like that. And we came up with a plan, and there had been a plan. Then the developers outspent us 12 to one. They defeated all of our candidates on the city council and took it away from us. I thought, "Life is too short." If people allow themselves to be bought off, if people don't care, I am not going to spearhead it. I have personal issues I have to deal with, I have work I have to do, and while I gave a certain amount of time to it — the library or whatever came up over the years — I am not going to make it like the raison d'etre of my existence.

**Joyce Kleiner:** I remember you speaking about shopping locally and particularly going to Phillip's to buy your coffee instead of buying it at Whole Foods.

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Can you talk a little bit about the extra effort that you feel people should exert into their local businesses?

**Peter Coyote:** Well, you know, not only did I believe in shopping at Phillip's coffee, I went to Whole Foods and I begged them not to sell coffee. I said, "Why don't you extend this as a gesture of courtesy to your next door neighbor who has been here for many, many, many years. You don't need the money for this and they absolutely need the money from this." And they absolutely didn't listen. So I learned this as a young boy. I lived in a town called Portland, Pennsylvania. 510 people. There used to be a pharmacy there called Bucky's. It used to have a soda fountain [and] we would go in and get sodas and stuff like that. The nearest town, really, was Stroudsberg, Pennsylvania. It was 15 or 20 miles away, about as far as here to San Rafael. One day I went into Bucky's and he had a closing sign — he was closing. I said, "Bucky, why are you going out of business, why are you going out of business?" He said, "Because of you." I said, "*What*?" I was maybe 12 years old. He said, "Yeah, because of you." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I don't make my living selling medicine, I can't make enough money selling medicine. I make my living selling band-aids and toothbrushes and toothpaste. And every time you went next door into the A&P and you bought a band-aid or toothbrush or toothpaste, you were taking money away from me. Even though it was cheaper, now you are going to have to drive to Stroudsberg to get your medicine." I never forgot that.

So you can look at it two ways. You can go to Lockwood's Pharmacy — when it used to be here — and you can pay a little bit more, but you will have the relationship with the pharmacist. He will live here. In an emergency, you can call him after hours. You will know his kids, they will know you, they will know your family, they will know your family history, [and] they will know your doctor. Or you can go to Wal-Mart and you can bust a union, you can hire overage people and immigrants for substandard pay, you can remove their protection, you can take away jobs from local people, to save yourself 10 cents, 15 cents, on every item. So each of us by our actions, are creating the economic system that we live in. The way that nature exhibits power is through aggregation. One drop of water, another drop of water, another drop of water, you have the Grand Canyon. One cell, another cell, another cell, you have an embryo or a human or a tumor. Well, all of the progressive people who live in Mill Valley, we are not aggregating our power. We are using the banks of the system we don't approve of, we are using the stores of global corporate capitalism. We are making our own personal life Laura Ashley and big straw hats. We are not including the rest of the world in that, which is what Buddhists do. Buddhists say, everything you do includes the entire world, so when I buy a computer, I want to make sure it is not going to end up poisoning Chinese kids who are taking it apart and are getting poisoned by the toxins. If you can't guarantee me that, I am not going to buy it from you. So that is the way in which, you know, Whole Foods is better than Safeway, but Whole Foods is not better, let's say, than the Mill Valley Market or any number of mom and pop stores or the farmer's market. It is very expensive. Working people can't afford to buy there, they just can't and they don't. So am I so perfect, am I so selfish that I have to have the best of everything? I think it is the wrong way to think. And I think that if everybody were going to family owned stores or demanding them or going to the farmer's market and saying, "we want to shop locally, we want to eat locally, we want to dress locally," that business would follow.

**Joyce Kleiner:** You spent a lot of time in Europe. Do you find yourself comparing — let's just say Mill Valley as opposed to the country — do you find yourself comparing the town of Mill Valley to you know, an equal-sized town in France or England or Spain or something like that?

**Peter Coyote:** Well, there is no comparison. First of all, the people in those communities have made a collective decision to take care of each other. When I pass people in those cities, I know that they have voted to take care of me. They have national health, collective health. I know if I fall down, they are not going to walk over me. Because they have national health, they don't have to save for emergencies to the same degree that we do. Because they voted to take care of each other, they are not as afraid of each other as we are, so they congregate amongst one another and they spend that disposable money in cafes and restaurants and out in the street and out and about. Because they are out in the street and out and about, there is less crime.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Do you feel that Mill Valley has a little bit too much veneer of that sort of culture and not enough substance of that kind of culture?

**Peter Coyote:** How many black people do you see in Mill Valley?

**Joyce Kleiner:** Don't get me started on that.

**Peter Coyote:** I rest my case. [pause in recording] Okay. Let me give you the clearest example. If you look at Canada, same language, same religion, some racial background, same cultural history [doorbell sound] — I have to see who is trying to get in, excuse me. [gets up for a moment]. Virtually identical to the United States, different social policy, and you have a completely different culture. Softer, less aggressive, less self-important, less frenetic, less frightened. So Mill Valley exists in the United States. It happens to be the town primarily of the 1 percent of the United States. The cops don't live here, the firemen don't live here. They live in Novato. The people who clean our houses don't live here. They come from Vallejo. So it is not exactly a town, it is like a gateless gated community. The gate is invisible but just drive through Mill Valley if you are black and see how quickly they stop you.

**Joyce Kleiner:** I want to transition now because I have some personal questions that are less about the oral history project and more my own interest.

**Peter Coyote:** Okay.

**Joyce Kleiner:** For the record, I approached you when salon.com had a panel. I think the title was Occupy Wall Street —

**Peter Coyote:** Oh, that's where it was. Okay, thank you, I remember. I just had lunch with David Talbot.

**Joyce Kleiner:** The two areas I want to talk about are one, the idea of seeing a new model of anarchism start to show up again and with your background, sort of what you think about that. The other is about the idea of seeing people coming up into activism. You must be feeling a desire to share your experience with them. I would like to talk about that a little bit. Like I said, I skimmed your book [and] I flagged a couple of places that were specifically about that. You and the Diggers and those things that came after the Diggers were — I don't know if you called yourselves anarchists or not — but you had a philosophy that had certain anarchistic elements to it.

**Peter Coyote:** Not anarchistic but anarchism. Anarchism is a political philosophy. In that sense, we were anarchists.

**Joyce Kleiner:** I'm sorry. Why don't you first clarify that for me and then talk about it. If in retrospect you feel that the model had limits as a social structure, I would like you tell me what you learned about that and then what you would like to say to these people who are coming up now who are 21, 25, saying some of the things that you were saying. I would really like to hear your opinions about that.

**Peter Coyote:** Okay, so, in the first place, anarchy colloquially means political chaos. But anarchism is a political philosophy that stresses decentralization and the lack of need for a centralized state, that people will organize themselves locally, create representatives, and do what they do without the need for a state, that the state is an imposition that is held in place by power, the threat of physical violence, or the exertion of physical violence — look at Syria today. So we were anarchists in that sense. I think that the Occupy Wall Street is the most important movement in the last 40 years. I think that it is a movement that is in response to a completely bankrupt system. The entire Congress has been conscripted as a concierge for the corporate sector. We have a faux-democracy in which the role of the Democrats is to put up tepid resistance to the Republicans and then be defeated in the end by those wily rascals so as to not interrupt the flow of money into their own coffers. The corporate sector is triumphant and dominant and the 99 percent has been ignored and abandoned. It is not new. Anybody who has read two books on history will know that laissez-faire capitalism has already existed and already been rejected. It was rejected by the liberals. The liberals are not the left wing — liberals were never designed to be the left wing. America used to have a very strong left wing. We used to have 40 socialist mayors. The number four periodical in the United States appealed to reason — it was a socialist magazine in 1914.

It was the introduction of World War I, which was a very unpopular war [and] which we got into because Wall Street bankers had given fortunes to Britain and France in loans. And when Russia collapsed with the Russian Revolution and [the bankers] learned that Germany could send 100 divisions to the Western Front, they were afraid that they would not get their money back and they pushed the government into declaring war. The people didn't want it. To deal with that, they created the Office of Public Information — some name like that — which was the first propaganda arm. They deliberately used the work of Sigmund Freud and the work of a guy named Trotter to rule people with their emotions and turn them against the Hun. And as soon as the war was over, they turned that against the left. For, you know, almost a century, they have completely hollowed out the left so that liberals, which used to be Franklin Roosevelt — Franklin Roosevelt created the New Deal as a bulwark to stop the left, the communists and socialists who were an active, vibrant part of America. So now, the liberals, which used to be the center, represents the left in America. So the result is that America is now the most unequal industrialized nation in the world. More than 30 percent of our people are poor and struggling, and people are pinched. You can't have a democracy with huge inequalities of wealth. My soap box is not equal to FOX TV. So it is this movement which is far more important than any leader. It doesn't matter who is president. The president has no power. We learned that with Obama. But this movement is basically saying, "You have abandoned your right to rule, you have abandoned

the people who put you into power, you have sold out our birthright and our history of democracy for money, and we are not going for it."

**Joyce Kleiner:** At the salon.com panel, you were the only person in the panel to try to bring some of the discussion to the blue collar worker —

**Peter Coyote:** The black kid.

**Joyce Kleiner:** No, I don't mean that, I mean, actually, you have said this before, you were saying, we need to remember that the 99 percent — a lot of the 99 percent are just average blue collar workers who are working in factories and on farms.

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah, two and three jobs.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Right. My question — this is a personal question for me and I really want to hear you work this out for me — is that the dominant voice, the seemingly dominant voice for Occupy Wall Street right now seems to be an anarchism model of no private property, no boundaries. But that does not feel like something that somebody working on tractors in Indiana is interested in. Do you feel that this is always going to be — is there any way to bring these two different kinds of perspective on where the change needs to be?

**Peter Coyote:** I don't know that anybody can say what the dominant voice of Occupy Wall Street is.

**Joyce Kleiner:** It is just the one that is getting the attention, which I —

**Peter Coyote:** It is the one that is being translated by the corporate press. But in point of fact, what the OWS has done is they created that mean, the 99 and 1 percent. They put that right into popular culture. They did a poll last week and the number one issue on the minds of American voters is the disparity between the rich and the poor. That is what Occupy Wall Street has already done. They have been completely changed the name of the game. They have completely changed the framing of the argument.

**Joyce Kleiner:** And you feel like that is really the take home message.

**Peter Coyote:** Incredibly valuable, incredibly valuable. What they are doing is they are having an extended conversation with themselves. This is what Rebecca Solnit pointed out. They are talking about the America they want to have. So there is going to be every kind of voice in there. They are doing it on a consensus basis. It takes time and it is slow, but they are actually having the real discussion, while our leaders are talking about "is the park clean" and they are calling in these militarized local police forces who are really serving the corporate sector. Believe me, the corporate sector understands that the financial debacle is going to get worse. They feel that the police [are] not going to be able to save them, even. If you look at the new legislation that is in Congress that the president just signed, which allows the military to pick up anyone they deem a terrorist, you can see how broad the net is becoming. This is not just Al Qaida and the Taliban. The way the law is being written, it could be anyone. So the corporate sector is setting out to

protect itself because they know on some level, the police are victimized by their policies and their successes just like the common people. There have been policemen on the Occupy Wall Street barricades. So this is a game changer. I trust movements more than I trust leaders.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Some of the things that you said that I caught in the book were the limits of consensus and how sometimes there wasn't a spot for a minority voice in the way that you guys made decisions. Do you feel like that that is something that needs to be folded into any new model?

**Peter Coyote:** First of all, I think that one of the great treasures of the American Bill of Rights is the protection it offers for minority rights. I think that is new in history. It is not like the Sunnis and Shiites, right? Those guys are struggling — once one of them takes over, they kill the other side. The idea of coexisting with divergent points of view is America. It is a great gift to the world. I think that the OWS people are doing that. I think there are all kinds of people, from the wacky to the sacred, down on those places, and I think they work it out and they work it out. There are probably also — what do you call people make trouble?

**Joyce Kleiner:** Rabble rousers? Shit disturbers?

**Peter Coyote:** No, people who enlist in an organization to destroy it. They pretend to be in it. Agent provocateurs. I am sure they are there too. But you know, things have a way of shaking out.

**Joyce Kleiner:** So what would you — have you had any opportunities to really be in dialogue with the new generation of activists?

**Peter Coyote:** Well, I know some people who are writing some policy suggestions. I wrote a blog on the Daily Kos. If you go to "sfzendog diary" on Daily Kos, I wrote something. I am not totally pleased with it. I think I was pushing them a little bit to declare what they wanted and declare objectives. I don't think that is as prudent now as I did when I wrote it. But you know something, I don't really want to say anything until I am asked. I mean, otherwise I am just another guy putting myself forward. I have writing out there. I know people who are writing policy stuff. They have asked me and I have given them my two cents and then I leave it. I don't want to push myself on anybody, offer myself as a leader, anything. I am representing a wisdom tradition, I am not representing a power tradition.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Early on in this discussion we are having — you used the world elder, which I personally like a lot and promote and wish people wouldn't shy away from using.

**Peter Coyote:** Yeah, but you know, American elders don't give a shit about Iranian elders. So it is not like a cure all.

**Joyce Kleiner:** You said somewhere in the beginning of your book, let me see —

**Peter Coyote:** You are so organized.

**Joyce Kleiner:** I'm not, it's a façade.

**Peter Coyote:** I'm impressed.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Here we go. "It is a feature of youth, I suppose, to distinguish itself and its values from the diminutions of the adults they are soon to become." Do you feel it is inevitable — like, for example, you guys named yourself the Diggers after the 17th century movement — I don't know how much you studied that movement. You seem to be pretty familiar with it. But do you think that it is inevitable that young people are going to always think that they are starting something from scratch and not seek their elders who have been through it for wisdom?

**Peter Coyote:** I don't think it is that clear cut. I mean, long before I was ever in the counterculture, I was seeking out beatniks. My interest in folk music took me off the streets of the suburbs and into New York City where I met bohemians and political people and old radicals and stuff like that, who informed my thinking. Gary Snyder has this wonderful phrase he calls "the great underground." He likens it to a huge river that is a parallel track to civilization as we know it. It is the energetic source for yogans and priests and shamans and artists and craftsmen and spiritual seekers. It rises and falls. Sometimes it is above ground like in the '60s. Other times it is below ground. But it is as old as man. It comes from the Paleolithic [era]. It is a coequal version of reality. When the dominant model of industrial, materialist, corporate capitalism fails, that is always there. It is engendered in the human breast. It is part of the imaginative possibility of mankind, of being human.

**Joyce Kleiner:** So it is a vein, kind of, that people tap into periodically.

**Peter Coyote:** Yes. So it is not ever inventing it out of a whole cloth. What Ronald Reagan and his forebears did is that they didn't want another generation of educated, active, engaged students to come along and young people to come along, so they declared the '60s a failure. And they promulgated a lot of photos of people in funky bellbottoms with clunky peace symbols and goofy looking Sonny and Cher types and declared it a failure, so that the next group of people went to Wall Street and got two BMWs by the time they were 30. That didn't work either. So they did their best to cut the young people off from that heritage. But with the Internet, with young people just naturally being curious, you just can't do it.

**Joyce Kleiner:** There must be things that you would like to say to the youngest activists coming up. If you had a chance, what would you tell them?

**Peter Coyote:** I would remind them that it is going to take three times as long as they think it is going to take to make any change and that they need to take care of themselves and stay healthy for the long haul.

**Joyce Kleiner:** Speaking of healthy, you were not always good to your body.

**Peter Coyote:** No.

**Joyce Kleiner:** In balance, do you regret some of the things that you did in the ’60s?

**Peter Coyote:** Well, I regret hurting my body. But I don’t dwell on any regrets. I am facing a year of medical treatment right now for Hepatitis C. The only things I really regret was having been a bad model to some young people who died trying to live like I did. But again, that is kind of why I am a Buddhist priest. I can’t do anything about the past.