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Spring, 2001

An Interview With Julia Butterfly Hill

by Paolo Scopacasa

In November 2000 someone cut through Luna's trunk with a chainsaw. Did you find out who it was and why they did it?

We know who it was, but we cannot make it public. There are people who have proof of this, but they are too afraid to come forward, because their life has been threatened. There is an independent investigation going on to find a way to solve this delicate situation. As to the why, Luna has become a great symbol, and therefore the potential for an attack was very high. It has always been like this -take people like Ghandi or Martin Luther King and all those who stand for an important cause. Luna represents the protection of justice, truth and love, and standing up for these things. The people who attacked Luna did this out of anger and frustration, and especially out of fear. They are afraid of losing their way of life, of taking responsibilities for their actions. However, this attack only made the symbol even stronger.



Julia Butterfly Hill, author of "[The Legacy of Luna](#)" published by Harper Collins. (Photo by Armando Rubino)

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

What did you feel when Luna was attacked, after you devoted two years of your life to protecting her? Did you perceive this as an attack against your person, too? Does this raise concerns for your personal safety?

Of course it was also an attack on me. About my safety, it was threatened in many ways when I was in the tree, but also after I came down and it still is. Our current world does not encourage people who stand for protecting our Earth -on the contrary, this increases the threat. But I refuse to live out of fear. I want to live out of justice and love. In September 1998, during the Luna tree-sit, David Chain, a 24 year old from Texas, was killed. At first I experienced enormous pain. Then Luna reminded me that even though they had killed David, they could not kill the love for the forests. So, this is my strength. The person who cut Luna is my greatest teacher. This is what love is to me: love in action. It is one thing to love when the times are easy, it is another thing to love when the times are hard and your life is threatened.

As you explained in your book, in the two years you spent with Luna she taught you a lot and gave you incredible strength. It is hard for people to understand this. Most of us have not made any comparable experience, and in our lives there is often no such intimate connection with nature. Where do you think we can draw our strength to change things for the better even when they seem to be getting worse?

I think it is part of human nature that it often takes a crisis for us to find love and strength. For me it was the steering wheel of my car that slammed into my skull in my car wreck, literally steering me in a new direction. I think that a good way to remind us of what we can and should do is to look in a child's eyes and ask yourself: can you honestly say to this child 'I don't care about your future'? If the answer is no, then you must do something. When a child is born, he or she does not choose where or the kind of world they will have to live in. Now I often look at children to rekindle my love and my strength when my heart weakens, because after I came down from Luna I had a harder time than in the two years I spent in the tree.

Native Americans have always had a close relationship with all the creatures of the Earth. Did you get closer to their view of life through your experience? Have you been in contact with any Native American tribes since then? I know, for example, that you are involved in the campaign for Leonard Peltier's liberation.

Yes, Leonard Peltier is a Native American who has been in prison for 25 years for a murder he did not commit. Like other people who have been wrongly imprisoned, he is paying for standing up for what he believes in and for defending the rights of a minority. I have been in contact with two Native American tribes in particular: the Lakota from Pine Ridge, South Dakota, and the Dineh Navaho from Big Mountain, Arizona. The Lakota of the Pine Ridge Reservation are the poorest people in the US. The unemployment rate is 98% there. With the [Circle of Life Foundation](http://www.circleoflifefoundation.org) we are working to improve their conditions.

All of the indigenous tribes knew how to live as one with nature. They taught about the three S's, that is Sovereignty, Subsistence and Spirituality. Sovereignty is the ability to self-govern by living according to the laws of nature. Among the Natives, the rules for humans patterned the rules of nature. Subsistence is about seeing the difference between needs and wants -in other words not to destroy what we need because of what we want, because of greed. Spirituality is about recognising that every life is sacred. Every time they take a life for food, the Natives ask for permission first, and then they give thanks.

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The Lakota have really taught me a lot. For example, in the Lakota language there is no word for mitigation. Mitigation is the word we use when we are trying to clean up the streams we have polluted. The concept does not exist in the minds of the Lakota because they do not make a mess in the first place, so they do not need to clean up. The Lakotas have so much to teach us. Unfortunately these three ways of living have been undermined and destroyed in every possible way, but the Natives who hold on to their spirituality are so much richer than the wealthiest people in America.

And what about the other tribe from Big Mountain?

In Big Mountain there are problems between the Hopi and the Dineh at the moment, but really it is the US government that is creating a false problem. These two tribes had both been confined to a desert area, which was considered totally uninteresting economically. But meanwhile coal and uranium have been discovered there, so these people are now forced to live on an even smaller area. The government is using non-traditionals in both tribes to stir up a fight between them. Meanwhile, the extraction of coal and uranium is threatening their lives. I went there with a group of people for a prayer walk. We had to escape from BIA and FBI agents who tried to arrest us because we had allegedly trespassed government property.

We walked past pilings of coal and radioactive uranium on the side of the road, close to the fields where people herd their sheep, close to their gardens, where they grow their food. This is the kind of things that we are working on. We cannot let this happen, let the rights of these people be abused even further. Thanks to the Circle of Life Foundation we have started various projects with the Lakota, for example an organic garden and a project to build houses out of hemp for the elderly.

We have been working to make hemp legal in the tribe. We had to fight against fears and biases, but in the end it was accepted. We are providing young people with laptop computers, so that they can educate other people in the tribe. Unfortunately the Drug Enforcement Agency ripped up the hemp camp, even though Tribe Law should prevail over government law on the reservations.

So there is still a lot to do, and very often the people who push in the opposite direction have a lot of power. What can we do to solve the numerous problems troubling our Earth?

We need to communicate and work together. Everyone can do their part by doing what they can do best. When I went to the redwood forest I only knew that I wanted and had to do something to stop the logging. I did the only thing I could do: climb up a tree, just like I did as a child -I grew up with two brothers. We are used to believing that we cannot make the difference, that we cannot change anything. Instead we can contribute to changing the world for the better. The best way is to do what we love the most, because if we do something that is useful and is also fun for us, we will do a better job and never get tired of it.

One of the things I learned when I was in Luna and saw things from a totally different perspective is that all issues, be they ecological or social, are really one and the same thing, because the Earth we live on is one. What we do the Earth we do to ourselves. Therefore everyone of us needs to change their way of life for the common good.

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However we often feel helpless when we are faced with issues that seem much larger than us.

Our money is a powerful tool at our disposal. Every cent we spend is a vote we cast for or against Life -ours and our Earth's. Every single choice we make is a way to express our power. I chose to be a vegan, that is I don't eat any animal product: no milk, no butter, no eggs, no fish, no meat.

In this way I contribute to saving the rain forests and reducing hunger. A major part of the rain forests of South America in particular is being logged to create pastures for cattle. Besides this, the production of a single portion of beef requires an amount of resources that could feed twelve people. Choosing to eat no meat means contributing to saving energy and water, apart from reducing the intake of toxins into your body and improving your health.

Also, I always carry a box for food and a thermos bottle for drinks, so I avoid using throw-away containers and cups. I am very careful about paper consumption, too, and I recycle as much as I can.

Forests are also being logged in order to produce furniture. We need to make careful choices, find out where the wood comes from and choose products made from recycled wood only. Together we can change the world.