

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill



WEB PAGE: <http://www.nwtrcc.org/mtap06/mtap0206.html#julia>

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIA BUTTERFLY HILL

By Daniel Woodham

DW: *Can you give us an update about your war tax resistance action? Was it \$150,000 that you resisted?*

JBH: I think it was more than that, like \$170,000. Now it's over \$200,000 with the penalties and interest. My contact with the IRS has just been about getting flooded with paperwork. They have tons of power and tons of money, and they'll just use these to try and overwhelm and squash those who are doing this as a form of dissent. It's so ironic the way corporations are getting away with billions of dollars that they owe in taxes yet still getting government contracts on top of that.

Are you choosing to settle with the IRS or is your goal to keep it away from them?

Currently I'm just involved in paperwork. I'm in this nonprofit Circle of Life, and we put on these really incredible festivals called "We the Planet." The IRS said, "Ooo, there must be money there." Actually the festivals are programmed so they cost the organization money. We don't use horrible corporate sponsors to meet the costs. So the IRS said they wanted to know about that and [how it relates financially] to me.

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When I was consulting around to make sure the consequences of my choice to do WTR didn't impact others around me or the work that I do in the nonprofit, I called lawyers and created clear lines between myself and the nonprofit. Because I have one of the larger single instances of resistance, and because I have quite a bit of public attention, one thing the IRS was very clear about was that there was no way they would negotiate with me. It would send the wrong signal to others who choose to do WTR.

One thing we talk about in the WTR movement is the range of emotions people experience in the different phases of their active civil disobedience. How has it been emotionally for you?

For a little bit it was a roller coaster, and now it's really solid. I started out cautious. I was not so much concerned for my own comfort as others might be. I believe our addiction to comfort has held a lot of people back from being liberated in this country. I think that's why we see powerful movements in other countries where people don't have as much access to privilege. They don't have that addiction to creature comforts, so they are willing to take more risks, which ends up being very liberating for them.

Just in my own life I've faced next to no comfort enough times so that I don't have that fear around comfort. My biggest concerns were around projects I was involved in and my nonprofit work. But for me I felt really solid and clear. I talked with a lot of WTRs or people who were WTRs. I had people go online for me to find out info because I don't use computers very often. I was very thoughtful in the process. And then I had a lot of strange circumstances in my life because of having done things like written books and having contracts for speaking somewhere and getting honorariums. All this created a lot of messiness, and I got some advice and set up an infrastructure.

Then I saw some people freaking out because of how my decision could impact their lives. I felt so responsible, and it put me in a tailspin for a few days. And then did what I always do and that is to go back to my purpose. I realized my decision to do WTR was to take a stand. We oftentimes have to take stands in our country and in our world where we don't know the outcome and can't control it. But this can't stop us from taking stands. It's almost like putting an energetic stake in the ground. Whether or not it makes it in the history books, there's something about the power of that energy, like "this is the spot of integrity on which I stand." And that got me right back to center. I was required to go to an IRS hearing with the head

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agent, and I went in there so clear and centered and left feeling the same way. It's so crucial that we be willing to just make these decisions.

It's coming from a place of conscience.

Exactly. We do the right thing because it's the right thing to do, regardless of the outcome. And another thing I tell people regarding activism and doing WTR is: What else would I want to do with my life anyway? Many people, including many in my family, are well meaning and narrow minded fundamentalists who are part of the myth of the "American Dream." When I spend time with these people and then others who take great risks, I see that the energy between the two is just different. I think people think they are happy with just the two-car garage, the 2.5 children, and the white picket fence. But really I don't think they are experiencing life to its fullest.

Have you continued to resist taxes since that initial time?

Absolutely. I set up a system whereby I could make an income that was below the poverty line. Part of my focus has always been about simplicity. The IRS agents were like "How could you live on that? It's not possible." I replied, "Yes it is. I don't own a car. I take public transportation. I live very simply." The most money I spend is on eating organic food because that's important to me. For my clothes I shop at thrift stores. And now my challenge is that there are other projects I would like to do, and I have to find a way to do them where I keep the project separate from me so the IRS has no legal standing for collection.

How do you see WTR in the bigger picture of grassroots activism and civil disobedience actions?

I've told people from the very beginning that WTR is doing civil disobedience every single day. In this country we seem addicted to what I call "The One Hit Wonder." We go for one big day of direct action and then get frustrated when the media doesn't give the action much airplay. Every action for justice is an important step to take, and there's something powerful about taking one step after the other. To me WTR is that: A commitment. It's like my two years and eight days in a tree. I called that my "ground fast," because I was away from the ground for that long. Every choice that is about an everyday commitment is a powerful choice to make.

Do you have any ideas about letting more people know about WTR?

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I've found it to be a challenge. When I do events that are a part of my nonprofit, I can't advertise or promote WTR because that is against the law, whereas I am protected under the constitution if I am talking about WTR as my own opinion. Circle of Life does a lot of important work in the world, and it is important for me to protect that work. I have so many people who come up to me and ask [about WTR] and I give them the website. I tell them about my own experience. I talk about the WTR communities across the country. Media is an important means for getting out info on WTR, and we are lucky to have mainstream media coverage on Tax Day.

I chose to take this stand while marching in the financial district in San Francisco right in the very beginning of the protests [against the Iraq War]. I helped shut down the financial district, the federal building, and three different intersections. I was out in the streets exercising my responsibilities as a citizen to ask for some accountability of my government. And it really hit me: How many people are going to go back to their lives and contribute to the very same thing they are out here protesting today? How many people drove here, one or two people per car to protest a war for oil? This was at the time I had found out I had this money available to me because of a lawsuit settlement. (It's not like I'm able to earn that much per year!) I found out the government wanted to take 32% of it. I tried to find ways to keep it from them and lawyers said, "You have to pay them; just be thankful for this other money you have to work with in the world." I really struggled with that. And then that day in the financial district I didn't struggle anymore. I said to myself there is no way I can give that money to the very same thing I am out here protesting against.

It's really interesting to see how many people will go out there and get arrested and do symbolic actions and won't take this step. I think oftentimes humans really act in the space of crisis. We also act in the space of inspiration, which is a really powerful way to act. I'm more excited about people who choose to act from inspiration rather than crisis. My sense is that if things get better in this country, even a little bit better, that people will be numbed back into their comfort. If things get much worse, there is a potential for leverage. I think growing the WTR movement means creating events that are inspirational and involve having celebrities, since that is what attracts people. There are very few famous people who have done WTR but my guess is that there are a few like Joan Baez or Woody Harrelson that might come.

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For me being famous is more difficult than doing WTR. I am nervous each time I get up on stage, but I remind myself that I have made a commitment and so I do it. It's important to listen to what you believe is important in life, that which calls you to a commitment. So I'm willing to continue putting myself out there in the limelight, and part of my commitment is to help people realize that I'm not a celebrity, that I'm a person. I chose to take a stand and that's what made me a celebrity.

Thank you for taking time today to share your thoughts with us and also for the work you continue to do.

Absolutely! Anything I can do to help I'd love to since I want to be an ally and a teammate on this.

Julia Butterfly Hill is the author of The Legacy of Luna, about her tree-sit, and One Makes a Difference. More information about her and the activities of Circle of Life can be found online at www.circleoflife.org or at PO Box 3764, Oakland, CA 94609, (510) 601- 9790. Also, see the related site, Activism Is Patriotism, where NWTRCC is listed under the "Money" button, www.activismispatriotism.org. Daniel Woodham is a war tax resister who lives in North Carolina. He is on NWTRCC's Administrative Committee.