

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

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A CONVERSATION WITH JULIA BUTTERFLY HILL

By Ann O'Shaughnessy

Julia Butterfly Hill is a writer, poet and activist. On December 18, 1997, she climbed up into a thousand-year-old redwood on a hillside in Humboldt County, California, to try and save it from becoming a paper product. She intended to stay there two or three weeks. Instead, she did not set foot on earth again for two years. She did save the tree and raised awareness about the environmentally destructive practice of clear-cutting. She wrote an account of her time in the tree in a book called, "The Legacy of Luna." It is a honest and powerful tale.

I interviewed Julia Butterfly Hill the other day. I had 20 minutes of her time, sandwiched between two other interviews she was doing. I was concerned that the time limitation would prevent us from exploring any topic in a meaningful way, but I was surprised. With directness and clarity we ventured right to the heart of things. I spoke to her of what I saw as waves and cycles of darkness and light that move through a life and asked her if she experienced that and how she managed it. How did she navigate the darkness when there was no apparent reason for its presence? She answered:

"I definitely have moments, just like everyone. I have moments of incredible joy and because my heart is that open, I also have moments of incredible pain. And one of the things that the tree (Luna) taught me in the storm was to just let it flow."

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I thought of the part of her book, *The Legacy of Luna*, that she was referring to. She had been living up in Luna for 70 days when a series of intense winter storms hit her tiny tarp-covered platform. She wrote:

"It was January, and gale-force winds, along with rain, sleet and hail, had set in. I grew up with storms. I knew they passed. These didn't."

The wind was so powerful it would pick up her platform and toss it three feet in the air — with her on it! It ripped the tarp that covered her from its fastenings. It howled like "wild banshees," preventing sleep. The winds and cold beat her up for days and days. After three weeks of this, Julia gradually began to become unraveled and consumed by fear. With clenched teeth and fists she tried to hold onto her life — to fight the storm and fight the cold. She began to feel like a speck. A speck clinging to the only thing she had — each breath. And there she was able to let go. She watched how the giant trees bent and swayed in the winds and felt herself letting go, letting it flow. As she says in her book:

"I just let it go. I let my muscles go. I let my jaw unlock. I let the wind blow and the craziness flow. I bent and flailed with it....I howled. I laughed. I whooped and cried and screamed and raged. I hollered and I jibbered and I jabbered. Whatever came through me, I just let it go. 'When my time comes, I'm going to die grinning,' I yelled." Reflecting on that time, Julia said to me,

"And that's crucial. An unattachment to the outcome is really important because when these feelings (darkness and fear) come, we can take notice, look for the lessons, give gratitude, and let them go. And that is what keeps my spirit strong. You know, I suffered with severe depression as a child, and all the way through my late teens. The greatest turning point for me was during the storm up in Luna. Being pared down to only my next breath allowed me to come to that clarity.... There was a time when I shut down in my life. And when I shut down, the darkness and the energy of greed and lack of consciousness in the world won. And when I reopened my heart, I regained my power. When you live with an open heart, though, you must be open to everything. So that's why those of us with an open heart feel pain more deeply and feel pain more intensely, but an open heart also gives you a deeper strength. The root word for courage is *cour*, which means heart. That's the only place true courage comes from."

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This image inspires me: Julia hanging on to that storm-ravaged tree, the moment of clarity when, hanging onto each breath, her heart just opened and she let it flow.

I had not known the real truth of this equation: open heart = more joy + more pain. In my 20's I had thought of myself as an openhearted person who loved deeply, but I can see now the toughness of the covering I had fashioned around my heart. I thought I had been a courageous person — I had climbed frozen ice in winter storms, I had traveled alone across country. But all the while I had held to carefully laid plans and honed my physical strength to protect me. I thought I needed to protect the soft open place inside me and I did just that very well. I used to say, "I am too soft for this hard world" and would fight off darkness and fear. I get a kick out of the fact that within me, at age 37, softness is spreading through me finally like warm syrup. What got it flowing? Leaving a secure relationship that did not feed my heart or soul. Leaving a secure job to do work that feeds my spirit. Honoring Love. Finally putting love above all else in my life.

These last few months I've been noticing a few things. A darkness that I thought signaled a weakening of my spirit, a deterioration of my strength and fine resolve, was nothing but a sign of my softening, my opening. By letting it flow a loving exchange was taking place between me and the world — as soiled and desperate as it can sometimes seem.

How can I explain this peeling away? Often when I finally get my passionate young daughter to sleep, I get out of her bed quickly and get on to something else. I find now that I stay after her soft snoring begins so I can smell her hair and stroke the perfect skin on her pink cheeks. And I find when I visit my friend Kathy, I often lay my head on her lap for her to stroke my head in silence. And my walks alone up the hill sometimes now take twice as long as I stop to examine the different new flowers poking through and watch the turkey vultures as they glide with the thermals.