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An Interview with Julia Butterfly Hill



Dec. 10, 1997, a 23-year-old woman by the name of Julia Butterfly Hill climbed 180 feet into an ancient California redwood tree in order to save it from being cut down by loggers. The tree, named Luna, remained her home for 738 days — until Pacific Lumber Company agreed not to destroy the redwood, or any other tree in a three-mile buffer zone.

This act of civil disobedience, particularly its successful outcome, promoted Hill to the annals of activist history and made her a type of celebrity in social justice circles. Currently, her life story is being made into a major motion picture, reportedly starring Rachel Weisz as Hill and Dustin Hoffman as the head of the timber company.

Hill is coming to Indianapolis next week as part of a two-day event entitled "Divine Action: Living Like You Mean It" with her friend Seane Corn, a yoga ambassador for Youth-Aids who developed the "Off the Mat, Into the World" campaign. NUVO spoke to Hill about her upcoming visit, as well as the tree-climbing that made her famous.

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NUVO: Explain the idea behind the “living like you mean it” philosophy that has become part of your teaching.

HILL: We live in a production-driven society, not a purpose-driven society. In a production-driven society, it's “how do you go to school, get good grades so you can go to college, get good grades in college so you can get a good job and make good money, buy some things you want, hopefully take care of those close to you, and someday die.” That's the unspoken mythos of our time. Realizing purpose is uncovering our own magnetic true north. If you hold a compass in a production-driven society, you're always looking outside yourself for the magnet: “Maybe that's the right job, the right relationship, the right college.” But when we uncover purpose at its truest essence, what we uncover is the true magnetic north inside of us. And as we uncover it and give attention to it, it becomes stronger. We can begin to have our life line up to our life purpose. In that space, we become more receptive and we also find we have a lot more love and joy in our life.

NUVO: You've written a lot about the time you spent in Luna, including battling the anger and rage you felt. At one point, however, you say the answer came to you: that you must simply love. How did you feel about that answer, what some would call the healing or transforming power of love, while witnessing the destruction around you?

HILL: At first I resisted it. I jokingly say that there were a lot of four-letter words I can think of and love was not the word in that moment. It was like, OK, give me another answer, this is so not the answer. (laughs) But that answer did keep coming, over and over again. And I did realize that although it was a simple answer, it would be the biggest challenge I would take on in my life.

NUVO: People forget, even knowing your story, what you had to endure during your time in the tree: the threats to your life, the loggers yelling obscenities. But it's about choices; we can choose how to respond.

HILL: That's the exciting part. It all comes down to choices and realizing we can be more powerful than we know ourselves to be. That choice comes from thought. So the beginning process starts with: Where is my thought

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right now? Is my thought aligning itself with love, joy, freedom, peace — all those things I want to see and be in the world? Or is it aligning itself somewhere that will zap that from me? We begin with the thought in this moment: What seed am I planting — and from that point, make a commitment, share a story, however it unfolds, and from there, our actions become an automatic, authentic response, living our life on purpose.

NUVO: What has stayed with you over the years from the experience of saving Luna?

HILL: I realized, how can we even think we're going to stop the clear cutting of our forests if we're so effective at clear cutting one another? What we need to heal the outer landscape is to also heal the inner landscape, to become the trunk, using a tree metaphor, so that every expression, every word, every action is that commitment toward healing, getting to the root of the disease. I call that disease Separation Syndrome. When you rip a plant's roots out of the ground, we know what happens. It begins to die. And so, too, as we rip our roots of connected consciousness from the earth and from one another, we can see the results of that all around us. As we move forward, in trying to create the world we want to live in, it's absolutely vital that we approach it as holistic healers, from the inside out, from the ground up.

NUVO: Where do we start addressing the disease?

HILL: You only have to look at your life. When I came down from Luna, because I had lived so long without it, I saw every paper cup, every paper napkin, as a tree and every plastic lid and to-go container as oil that came from this earth and also plastic that destroys the earth, animals and people. We can start by asking, how can I walk lighter as an expression of my love for this earth, for my health and for future generations?