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Interview with Julia Butterfly Hill

By Brian Awehali

Julia Butterfly Hill brought international attention to the plight of the world's last remaining ancient forests when she climbed 180 feet up a 1000-year-old redwood tree and refused to come down. Her historic 738-day protest of the environmental destruction caused by clear-cutting culminated with a negotiated agreement that provided permanent protection for the tree ("Luna") and a nearly three-acre buffer zone.

*Following her tree-sit, Julia became the author of the national bestseller, *The Legacy of Luna* and co-author of *One Makes The Difference* (both published by HarperSanFrancisco). Julia also founded the nonprofit organization, *Circle of Life* (www.circleoflife.org) to promote sustainability, restoration, and preservation of life. The child of a preacher, she has worked to link her strong sense of spirituality to environmental and social justice activism.*

BA: Why do you think it's important to unify spirituality and political activism?

JBH: My experience in my activism has been that grassroots activism is the roots, spirituality/faith/religion is the branches, and we've been missing the trunk. The spirituality/faith/religion organizations are really insular, focused on defining who your community is and taking care of that community. For example, the New Age movement is really about working on yourself, and

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the idea that the world will be enlightened as you become enlightened, except that they never step out into the world.

BA: You've been very successful at talking about radical social activism in faith-based and spiritual communities. How do you reach them?

JBH: One of the things I always remind people of is that if you want to talk about radicals, talk about Jesus and God. Go back to the beginning. God's original intention was to hang out in a beautiful garden with two naked vegetarians. That's a pretty radical guy, right? And Jesus was the original hippie. His whole message was about living simply, doing away with material goods, doing away with all the value we place on material goods, and living a life where unconditional love is a verb versus just a mouthpiece.

And it was so radical that they murdered him for it. That's how radical it was. And to this day, it's still that radical.

BA: Do you think that religious texts—the things people use as touchstones—need to be updated, because they haven't moved sufficiently with the realities of the planet?

JBH: A lot of people still live with me as the woman who lived in a tree. I lived in a tree from 1997 to 1999. It's 2005 now. And I'm clear that my commitment is to taking what I learned *then* and seeing how it applies *now*. I feel the same about Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam and you name it. Every faith-based tradition I've studied has powerful, enduring truths. But the problem is that we take those powerful truths and we keep them stuck in the time in which they were translated, and say that *that* is the whole truth, instead of letting the truth grow from the historical context and continue to grow as life does.

I think that's why a lot of activists can't relate to [religion]. They see it as this dead and dying thing. Sadly, we've done that with a lot of powerful, powerful truths in various religions.... We've stuck [them] in a stagnant pond. When I see this dead and dying pond, I know that we can create a system that's going to bring new water in and let old water move out, and I'm committed to the restoration of that pond. I know that there's life there, and I refuse to give up on it.

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BA: Do you feel the fundamental thing missing there is that God, in that generative sense, is change and always has been?

JBH: For me, when you look at Christian traditions or the three families that came out of Abraham, they're all based on "In the beginning there was nothing but God. And then life evolved from that space." And if that's the truth as you see it, then it means that life is not only a gift from God, it's a gift *of* God. A lot of my interactions have been with people saying, "You need to worship the creator, not the creation, Julia." But if they read their text—their own text—there was nothing but God in the beginning, and then God created. So *everything*—the trees, the flies, the frogs, the mosquitoes—I *hate* mosquitoes—even the mosquitoes are a form of God. And that's *hard* to take on, but I'm willing to try!

BA: Did God create George W. Bush?

JBH: Absolutely. I'm also clear that there's a part of Bush that lives in each and every one of us. That's why it's so easy to be angry at him. Because we see a piece of ourselves. He's an extreme example of pieces we have within all of ourselves which, if we're not careful, we can fall into. We all have moments of being closed-minded and fundamental around our beliefs.

I mean, look at the activist movement! Holy cow! The kinds of ways the activist movement gets up on its pedestal and says it is right and everyone else is wrong and allows no space for diversity and creativity and even, dare I say it, differences in ideology?

BA: Oh no! (*laughing*)

JBH: Yeah! Our activist movement, sadly, in many ways mirrors Bush and the White House!

.... There's the whole activist movement of pointing fingers outward, outward, outward and refusing to look at the three fingers that point back every time we point out. [We are] not doing the healing work that we need to do, what we need to do within ourselves. It's clear that the wounds that exist on the planet and in our communities only exist there because they already exist within ourselves.

It's not possible to create holistic-healing planning on our planet and in our communities if we're not including ourselves in that process. And it's not possible to make that happen if we're only looking at ourselves and we're

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not looking at the greater systems and the greater world. So to me, it's not just powerful, it's absolutely vital to our success that we build a bridge between the two.

Because if we don't, we're literally killing off what it is we're trying to make happen in the world. It's not possible to make it happen out there if it's not at the same time happening in here, within ourselves. That's why war doesn't work. War doesn't create peace because it's violent. It's killing off what it's trying to create. And in turn, [if] we get really elitist and up on our pedestal about how bad war is, we turn that on each other. I've been in completely abusive meetings about how to do a peace action.

BA: I want to get clear what you mean. What is the relationship between an inward-turning spirituality and an outward-pointing activism? How can they be interconnected?

JBH: My understanding of it is that either one without the other is not whole, healthy, and complete. And because of that, neither one without the other can ultimately accomplish its goals. It can get them momentarily, but they're not going to last.

I call it spiritual activation. Pardon the metaphor, but [it's] the caterpillar turning into the butterfly. The caterpillar's got a pretty comfy life, right? It just hangs out on its food source. It's prey to some birds and things, but usually it's pretty camouflaged, so its success rate of living is pretty high.

There's no reason why it would go through the process of transformation. And then it has this inner calling, and the first thing it does is take its innermost depths and spin itself in them. And it creates a space where there's no running away. In industrialized countries we have all kinds of ways of running away. Shopping, theaters, eating out....

There's no running away when you're spinning yourself in your innermost self. You're just getting real with what's going on. And as you start to get real with what's going on, you begin to liquefy. And people are afraid of the liquefaction process. In the spiritual and religious communities, they're afraid of it, and if they're in activist communities, they're afraid of it.

Because in the spiritual and religious communities, they would be mandated to hold themselves accountable for what their actions are manifesting in the world. And the majority of what's happening under the auspices of faith-

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based traditions are not manifesting the mission and vision of what they proclaim.

With the activist communities, it's about getting real with the fact that we can point fingers all we want, but if we're not holding ourselves accountable, just like we want religious communities or the government to hold themselves accountable, what good are we to our vision?

One interesting thing about the caterpillar becoming a butterfly is that the last thing that happens, literally, is the head pops off. And until the head pops off, you can pull a cell out of that liquid, and it'll only recreate part of the butterfly. The antennae, the wing, or whatever. But once the head pops off and completely absorbs into the liquid, any one cell will recreate the whole of the butterfly.

And *then*, the challenging part is for people to start to do that work, and even though it's a little tight and dark in there, it's no longer scary because we're comfortable with it. But the next process is really being courageous enough to break through that cocoon of comfortability. In activist circles, it's about being courageous enough to believe that it's more than our physical might and our brilliant minds that are going to stop this machine of devastation. It's about admitting that some form of heart and sacred spirit are at work too.

Brian Awehali is the founder and editor of LiP: Informed Revolt, a journal of radical politics, culture, sex, and humor. An award-winning author, his work has appeared in or on Alternet, Black World Today, Z Magazine, High Times, Britannica.com, ColorsNW and the Santa Fe New Mexican, among other outlets.