

## On Tree-sitting and the Disease of Disconnect

Conversation with Julia Butterfly Hill, an environmental activist and author who lived in the treetop of California a redwood tree named Luna for 738 days to save it from logging.

**Oto Hudec:** *Dear Julia, first of all I want to thank you for what you did and are still doing – not only for saving redwoods, but also for giving such strong encouragement to all people who want to protect the environment – for showing what is possible or, better to say, that even the impossible is possible.*

**Julia Butterfly Hill:** Thank you so much, Oto. i wanted to let you know that i do not capitalize the letter "i" nor the first letters in my name because while i was living in Luna, i came to realize on such a personal level how deeply interconnected and interdependent we are with ALL life. we are not separate. And in language, capitalizing these letters show we are separate. So even though it may seem that i am being lazy, or it is silly or unimportant, i started no longer capitalizing as a way of honoring this deep, interconnected and interdependent web of life.

**OH:** *Right now you are the inspiration for many who want to protect forests, trees, or other natural areas from destruction for profit. I would like to know if you were also inspired by other activists or environmental movements related to trees when you decided to climb Luna? Were you, for example, aware of the Chipko movement in India?*

**JBH:** The only activists i was ever exposed to was when i was about 14 years old, i saw a magazine ad with Greenpeace activists in their very small boats stopping whaling boats. i tore that page out of the magazine and hung it up on my wall. i thought to myself that those were the kind of people i admired; people who were courageous and doing something very important. It was very inspiring to me. But at that time, i did not do any more research and was not exposed to any more information. i lived in a very closed-minded small town and was raised in a very strict religious home. My parents did raise us to respect nature, but that was about all.

**OH:** *As I wrote earlier, your act of civil disobedience became an inspiration for many. Maybe one example that comes to mind is a protest of Miranda Gibson who stayed for more than a year on top of a eucalyptus tree in Tasmania. On the other hand, there were well-covered protests in Germany, where building treehouses in the forest was also a strategy to limit the enlargement of coal mines. Do you keep track of these new actions, or are you in contact with young environmental activists?*

**JBH:** i communicated with Miranda while she was in the tree and did what i could to support her and her action. In the United States, i helped to launch the Brower Youth Awards in honor of the famous environmentalist David Brower, as well as helping to launch the Youth Program for Bioneers, a very famous gathering that happens in California but now has partner programs around the United States. i have also helped to mentor and support, including fundraising for many youth organizations. Because i am quite famous for my action, one of the biggest challenges for me

personally is that millions of people know about me and want and need my help, but there is only one of me, and i am not paid by any organization and do not have a rich donor or benefactor to support me. People think because i am famous and because i wrote a book i must be rich, but the opposite is true. i am famous for being an activist – that means i am famous for being a volunteer. i have helped many thousands of individuals, communities, and organizations around the world – not only for forest protection, but also with things like community gardens, protecting indigenous lands and rights, speaking out and doing direct action against nuclear power and the military industrial complex and wars, environmental justice issues like waste incinerators, direct action against destructive oil drilling practices in countries like Ecuador, so many, many issues.

**OH:** *Your protest became a symbol for saving something that is so precious – ancient California redwood trees – from logging. Right now I believe the environmental movement is facing difficult times, when for example entire forests can disappear because of fires exacerbated by climate change. The root cause is almost invisible and global. The effect is local. Do you believe in the power of protest similar to your long stay in Luna's treetop in today's situation? What do we need now, individual protests, large movements, or both? Or something else, on another level?*

**JBH:** It has always been about looking first at our own lives and seeing where we can make personal changes so that we can live in even more integrity with the world we want to live in. Then second, to look in our community, where we live, and see how and where we can get involved to help make it the healthiest, safest, and most beautiful place we can, and then getting involved at the political level, which affects the global level. Not only being involved in elections, but showing up to meetings, sending letters, and NOT just letters when we are upset, but also sending letters of thanks when they do something we like – ESPECIALLY when it is on an opposing side. When someone on an opposing side does something we like, appreciate, or is helpful (even if it is not perfect), we need to take the time to thank them and acknowledge them. Otherwise all they ever hear from us is our discontent, which makes them care much less about EVER doing anything that might help build bridges of connection.

**OH:** *When I was doing my research into tree protests and environmental movements in general, it struck me how often there are courageous women who take stands, and how they endure so long with the same determination. Besides globally known personalities (such as you, Greta Thunberg, Miranda Gibson, Severn Cullis-Suzuki, and, of course, the Chipko movement), I can say the same about climate activists in Slovakia, where one of the most active groups is called "Worried Mothers". Do you think it could be said, of course with some generalization, that women are more understanding towards the state of nature (and towards ourselves, as we are part of it), and maybe less drawn to see it as a source of raw material, something that is here to serve us?*

**JBH:** Of course there are many exceptions to this, however it does seem that feminine energy is more designed towards nurturing and thinking long term. Possibly it is hard-wired into our DNA because of our capacity to be the carriers of life. Oftentimes, we do see women at the forefront of movements. We also see that

micro-loans and grants given to women versus men will most often far benefit the community versus the individual.

However, we can look at many, many women in politics who also behave just like their incredibly corrupt, hateful, violent male counterparts. Growing up, i actually always had more male friends; i didn't connect with girls.

**OH:** *Few people have experienced living for such a long time so close to another living organism – a plant. In our everyday life, our lives are fully determined by the complex habits of our civilization, by products, institutions, and group rules. We consume, we travel, we work – and all of that creates an environmental footprint – affecting in the end even the trees. Artworks and art events also do this. How was it for you to descend from the Tree and get back to urban life? Isn't it actually harder to maintain the same beliefs, the same determination, back in everyday life?*

*Like making hundreds of small “disobedience” choices in our everyday life, getting rid of habits, comfort, and conformism?*

**JBH:** It is true. It is MUCH harder to live in care for this Sacred Earth and trees in our current systems. However, i am constantly doing my best always to look for the best ways to live my beliefs. For example, all the books that i have written are printed on 100 percent post-consumer waste recycled content, are processed chlorine free, and are printed with plant-based inks. i also co-produced two very large music festivals and events that were produced almost waste free. For example, the first one we did had over 10,000 people attend, and at the end of it we had LESS than ONE dumpster of trash after an entire day of music, speakers, food, etc. Another example, i co-created an animation and video to talk about the importance of protecting forests, and we even used recycled materials in much of the animation. i do my best not to buy all the things we are tricked into thinking we need. When i do buy things, i first see if it is something i can buy from a thrift store or from a local business instead of online or from a big shopping mall. i reuse everything i possibly can. i wear clothes until they begin to fall apart – not until someone tells me they are not fashionable anymore. There is no way to live a PERFECT life. i am an imperfect human living in an imperfect world. However, i can do my best to think about the choices i make, and i do my very best to make thoughtful and caring choices, even if they might not be the “popular” ones.

**OH:** *My artwork is called Floating Arboretum. I am imagining how in a changing climate, with the many threats that trees and forests face from mining, industrial agriculture, and much more, that somebody in the not so distant future could carefully gather endangered trees on a symbolic floating platform and sail with them somewhere – to an imaginary safety. My question is, if you could choose today, symbolically, one or a few trees from anywhere in the world that deserve such protection, which would it be?*

**JBH:** All ancient forests everywhere. We have so few of our ancient forests left. They are more than just the trees, it is the entire ecosystem. They are a biodiversity bank of food, medicine, endangered species, climate stabilizers, water systems, clean air filters, homes to indigenous people. And what many people don't think about –

peace, quiet, except for sounds of nature; even this is going to disappear forever if we are not more careful and responsible.

**OH:** *Do you still visit Luna from time to time? Or do you feel a strong connection to the trees close to where you live and wherever you are? I believe there is something really magical about trees – their beauty, their longevity, so many ways they are helpful to us and to the whole ecosystem (and they are an ecosystem in itself too) – somehow people are drawn to them. They are the source of poems, songs, and rituals. It seems that people relate to them more strongly than to many other forms of life. What is it, do you think, that makes this bond between trees and humans?*

**JBH:** i used to visit Luna regularly, but i have been injured too many times; the last time i was at a stop light in my car and was hit from behind and knocked into the car in front of me by someone who then drove away. It turns out i have a disease called Ehler's-Danlos Syndrome that affects all the connective tissue in the body. It is a progressive disease and mine is at a late stage, and with such severe injuries i cannot any longer make the steep part of the hike to get to Luna. However, Luna is a part of who i am, so Luna is always with me.

So many reasons why we might feel so connected to trees – maybe it is because trees are connected to Earth and Sky, maybe it is because trees take in our carbon dioxide and give us clean air and are also part of what provides us with water, maybe it is because trees provide us food and medicine, maybe because they provide us shelter and fire, maybe because they provide us with SO much, maybe it is because when we climb a tree we can get closer to "heaven" or the "gods" (whatever belief someone might have.)

**OH:** *As I write these questions, we realize we live in a more and more destabilized world, both politically and environmentally. After another round of the UN climate conference, after another year of record temperatures – which will affect forests and us – I have experienced how often activists experience burn-out. Do you have your own ways to be – in what we stand for – less like matches that burn and more like trees that slowly grow over the years?*

**JBH:** It is important that we choose to stand for what we love. When we stand for what we love and remember that we are standing for what we love, not just for what we do not like or are angry at, then that love can sustain us even when it gets hard. i have struggled with depression my entire life, since i was a little girl, so i know how hard it can be. i feel things VERY deeply. i feel the pain of what we are doing as if it is happening TO me. We cannot be attached to outcomes. We can only serve from our hearts. We cannot control the outcomes, as much as we so wish that we could. Trees take in our toxins and breathe out pure air, help stabilize the climate, and play a role in the system that provides us water to drink. They do this over and over again, even though we are so incredibly disrespectful to trees and forests. They are models to us of how to live lives of care and action regardless of the outcome. If we are attached to the outcomes we will become even more depressed and angry and burnt out. If we live lives of service and do our best to live in integrity with the kind of world we want to see without attachment to outcome, then we can have the flexibility of a tree in the

storm – the storms of life will blow, but we can bend with them and survive the storms instead of being rigid and breaking.

**OH:** *This question concerns art. The environmental concern is definitely very present in the current artworld. I've always felt there is some bond and sympathy between the art sphere and the environmental sphere. We live in our wide, beyond frontiers, art community – where the culture means almost everything, yet I am also a bit sceptical of the power of art in real (environmental) causes. How do you perceive the role of art from your perspective, as an activist and a tree preservationist?*

**JBH:** Art has been very important to me since i was very young. Art was a way to be able to communicate in a healthy way all that i felt inside. Art in all its forms is also a way to communicate across perceived boundaries, including language, cultures, religions, and even politics. Art can reach places within us that other things sometimes cannot.

**OH:** *What occurred to me when I was researching many tree-sit protests is that although it seems that the humans who took a role of civil disobedience stood for the survival of the trees, they actually stood with the trees, as one, for the survival of both. The protest becomes something done together with the natural world, not just for the natural world. And I think that shift of perception is what is meaningful in your stay with Luna, the Redwood tree. Am I right? How do you see it today?*

**JBH:** i agree. Tree sitting becomes a symbiotic relationship if a person stays long enough, like i did. Luna became the greatest teacher and greatest friend i have ever had in my life, and ever will have. Luna became my home, even as i was there to ensure that Luna could continue to be the home of all that lived there, hopefully for a very, very long time to come. There is an entire ecosystem that lives, grows, and thrives in the upper canopy of Luna. And the needles and branches that fall from Luna create what is called “duff” along the forest floor, that feed it and create new life. It is all a circle of life, and when one part of it is threatened all of it becomes threatened. So, when i climbed up into Luna's branches, i became a part of that ecosystem. i did my best to leave as small a physical imprint as possible, and hopefully as much of a positive energetic imprint as possible. While living up there, i realized on such a deep level that the root of ALL the issues we face today – ALL of them – is the Disease of Disconnect, what i also call Separation Syndrome. When we rip a plant's roots out of its connection to life it begins to die. So too, as we have ripped out the roots of our consciousness, of our connection with all life, so too we have begun to kill off the beauty and health in ourselves, the planet, and the world around us. Ultimately, if we wish to stop the horribly destructive path that we have created, we need to remember we are truly connected with all that is, was, and ever will be (science has proven this – it isn't just a spiritual belief) and begin to live in a way that honours that sacred bond.

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