

A Blend of Spirit and Politics

A young woman with no past affiliations with political or ecological movements has become a symbol embodying this striving to blend diverse social concerns, to practice a new brand of social activism; one that sees spirit as being integral to, rather than separate from the struggle for respect of Mother Earth and of our brothers and sisters. She is one of many examples.

An Earth Day High above the Ground

Just before Earth Day 1999 a group of striking metalworkers from Washington State hiked all the way to a mountain in Humboldt County, California, to the tree that a woman of great determination had been inhabiting (or more precisely, “tree sitting”) for more than a year; that was how long she had stayed on a platform in a redwood tree, from 100 to 180 feet above the ground. Through her convictions and persistence, even without a premeditated plan, she had managed to bring together two related issues: labor and protection of the environment. David Foster, a leader of the United Steelworkers of America, had come all the way from Washington State to honor personally the one who had been a continuous source of inspiration for the striking steelworkers. Foster was determined to climb the tree on his own. Actually, he needed the help of a pulley system to make it up to the platform the woman occupied.

Though brief, their encounter was a significant one. Two movements had reached out to each other, and the inspired action of a woman had played a great role in this achievement. Big, burly, reputedly “tough guys” could look up to a young, slender, spontaneous woman, who had strengthened her resolve and undergone a transformational initiation high in the branches of one of the most ancient trees in America. This was the prelude to Earth Day proper. The next event would be a women’s affair; it was the surprise visit of singers Joan Baez and Bonnie Raitt. With the newly devised pulley system, the two musicians made it up the tree. At first the three were alone, then two filmmakers came up. They had a conversation, then the artists sang, and the younger woman shared her poems. Bonnie had recently received an Arthur M. Sohcot Award for public service; she dedicated this award to Julia, leaving it to her as a gift—a big piece of Tiffany glass.

A Tree and a Tree Dweller

The young woman living on a platform in the thousand-year-old redwood tree named Luna was Julia Butterfly Hill; she stayed there 738 days between December 1997 and December 1999, celebrating there both her twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth birthdays. Her odyssey is retold in *The Legacy of Luna*.⁽⁷⁾ During that time, Julia never descended or touched the ground, learning to negotiate life high up on a platform in which she could not even stand straight. Only in December of 1998 did she move partway down the trunk to a much sturdier and wider platform.

Julia Butterfly Hill’s connection with the environmental cause was already in place

before she knew it. While growing up she had traveled extensively with her family, and often explored rivers close to the campgrounds. At age six, while she was taking a hike with her family, a butterfly alighted on her finger, accompanying her for the whole hike. That was the origin of her nickname, "Butterfly."

But a connection with nature is hardly sufficient in itself to prepare a young woman for the formidable constraints of life up high in one of the highest trees of creation, where tight space, lack of amenities, solitude, and weather extremes could break any soul. Julia's path had been laid in the first ten years of her life, ever since her father, a traveling preacher, had taken his family with him from town to town in a thirty-two-foot camper. The child shared that small, contained space with her father, mother, and two younger brothers.

When she was ten, the family settled in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Her life became the normal life of a teenager, with hardly any other expectations than the usual. Among these, she had the desire to strike out and reach success, and directed her intentions toward business school. But at age twenty-two something else was in store for the young woman. In August 1996 she was driving for a friend who had been drinking, when the car was hit from behind by a drunken driver in what came to be a near-fatal crash. The steering wheel jammed her right eye into her skull. To recover, she had to go through long months of intensive therapy that helped her retrieve short-term memory and motor skills. It took much longer than that to look at her life and see herself in a different light. "I also saw that had I not come through the way I did, I would have been very disappointed with my empty life....I resolved to change my life, and I wanted to follow a more spiritual life." On coming out of therapy she embraced the idea of traveling around the world. She never made it past California's Humboldt County.

A stranger had mentioned the redwoods along the Lost Coast to Julia's traveling party. Julia found herself very eager to visit Grizzly State Park and see the ancient trees for the first time. "As I crossed the highway, I felt something calling to me. Upon entering the forest, I started walking faster, and then, feeling this exhilarating energy, I broke into a run, leaping over logs as I plunged in deeper." Unknowingly, she had just walked next to the property of Pacific Lumber/Maxxam Corporation, owned by Texan tycoon Charles Hurwitz. Not far behind the screen of the old forest lay the path of destruction that Charles Hurwitz had ordered his newly acquired Pacific Lumber to make in the name of short-term profit. Witnessing this as she walked out of the forest, Julia felt like a different woman. Moved by the power of the moment, she decided to pray for guidance, and chose a special spot between some trees and a stream. After the prayer, it was easier to forego the world journey she had been dreaming of; she felt very serene about an activist choice that would be anything but easy. She went back home and sold her belongings in order to finance her next step. "...a deep and compelling sense told me that I had to walk the path I had chosen; or rather, the path that seemed to have chosen me. There was a calling and I would not be at peace until I fulfilled it." In Arcata, California she called the Environmental Protection and Information Center (EPIC) and they directed her to a "base camp" where direct action was organized. When she arrived at the base camp, she realized it was being closed down, and she felt quite disappointed. Seeking something else to do, she decided to go to Eureka, seven miles to the south, where a rally was being held.

A speaker addressed the crowd, informing them about police brutality, then invited others to the microphone. Knowing little about the issue, Julia felt nevertheless compelled to speak. All she knew was what she had seen—forests being destroyed. The passion in her plea claimed the attention of a certain “Shakespeare” (*nom de guerre*) who felt Julia was the kind of person he could work with. That was fortunate; at that point Shakespeare was the only one who had noticed Julia’s desire, and the coming winter was drawing direct action to a lull. In the following days she found herself waiting to see what she was called to do, with only Shakespeare encouraging her to hang on. Finally, one day an activist asked for a volunteer to “sit in Luna,” and Julia found herself answering positively and with enthusiasm, even if with little precise understanding. On his side, the man accepted her offer only because there were no other volunteers.

Climbing the steep slope to the tree already was an ordeal for Julia, who ran out of breath, and then started to experience self-doubt. Her first “tree-sit” under the rain was the next trial; the cotton clothes she was wearing stayed wet and cold. The tree was called “Luna” (Spanish for moon) because the platform on top of it had been built by the light of the full moon. Earth First had established Luna as a site for tree-sitting; Julia was not affiliated with that organization. And at that moment she still had scanty education about sustainable forestry or environmental matters.

Luna is a unique tree in a unique location. The ancient redwood stands atop a cliff, where it is exposed to high winds and lightning, and in the past, to forest fires. At its bottom are two “caves” with charred linings that extend almost completely through the trunk. The lower branches have completely broken off, and many burls cover the trunk throughout. Not far from the top is another cave, the result of a lightning fire. (See sidebar)

Julia on Luna’s Ecology and Magic

“The magical world of Luna is just phenomenal, down to how these trees disperse the water that falls from the sky. I was sitting in the fog one day, when I noticed the needles at the top part of the tree are knobbier than the needles lower down. Up high they look like gnarled fingers raking in the moisture from the fog and the rain. The water, drip by drip, gathers until it starts swirling down the trunk to the ground, over the smooth bark at the tip of the tree toward the increasingly shaggy bark down below, which absorbs more and more of the meandering flow....

...I explored the canopy, the upper half of Luna. There’s a whole forest in her, and it’s absolutely magical. Ferns, salmonberry, and huckleberry grow in Luna’s pockets where duff has collected over the years. There are many different fungi and mosses and lichens; *usnia* hangs down like Spanish moss; scalloped, whitish gray lichen and teeny, tiny mushrooms shaped like satellite dishes nestle in her folds; green, furry moss, dark in the center and neon at its edges, coats her sides. Especially in the fog, Luna is a fairy tale waiting to happen.” (from *The Legacy of Luna*)

Julia's first trial by fire was climbing the tree with only a minimal, on-the-spot crash-course in climbing. On the platform she met with two other occupiers, and spent the first sleepless nights on windy and stormy days there, coming down on the sixth day. The very next day she was asked whether she wanted to go back up to replace the two male occupants, and she immediately felt called to do so. This second time she was better prepared to face the weather, but she got very sick, with accompanying extreme hot and cold flashes, and convulsions. It was around Thanksgiving time, and she left the tree when relief arrived, later discovering that she had been suffering from two viruses, one of which had moved into her kidneys. At this point Luna was under attack; the next harvest plan by Pacific Lumber included that tree.