

Julia Butterfly Hill:

To Live Fully and Completely in Love...



BY MATTHEW TAYLOR

While researching the “Save the Oaks Campaign,” I spotted Julia Butterfly Hill hanging out at the Berkeley Oak Grove for a party to commemorate 100 days of tree-sitting (see *Who Speaks for the Trees?*, page 16). Julia’s reflections on living a life of pure love follow...

What’s at stake here at the oak grove?

I’m passionate about making our cities more livable so people stop leaving cities in order to live. An area like this with a green space with trees is a critical piece... What else is at stake here [are] the kind of people who you’ll never know, who are having a difficult day, and they come here, and they breathe, and they breathe peace, hope, love and possibility. Those people and experiences cannot fit on an environmental impact report or a chart or a graph when the city’s making its budget for things like crime prevention.

John Quigley and I launched a tree-sit in a farm in South Central Los Angeles, where there were 3-year-olds running around completely safe just like there are here today, but unlike Berkeley, in South Central it was dangerous... and six blocks away people are shooting each other. When that farm went in, the crime in that neighborhood dropped by over 65 percent. After they bulldozed that farm into the ground — the first week after that farm was bulldozed — crime went up 20 percent. It was not crime related to people reacting about the farm, it was just because that farm brought peace into the neighborhood... The more parks we have, the less crime there will be.

What happened with the South Central tree-sit?

The tree-sit was part of a 14-acre farm, the largest working urban farm in the country... We’re still working to get that land back; it’s in court, and we’re working to get other areas within their district to farm on and areas outside their district. One of the results of the positive publicity [generated with the tree-sit] was that a landowner who owns an organic agricul-

tural land trust contacted the farmers, and he was willing for them to farm up to 150 of his acres. They’ve actually started their own community-supported agriculture; by selling to the communities of wealth, it helps offset and supply the funds necessary to grow the food for their community, who are people who live well below the poverty line.

So even though the tree-sit did not succeed in its stated objective of saving that farm, it worked in a longer-term sense to open up other possibilities.

We went in with the commitment to do everything we could to save that farm, but there were a whole lot of forces 15 years in the making that were set on destroying that farm. South

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Central is a community of color. When people hear South Central, they think, ‘a disposable community.’ Part of our biggest commitment in starting that tree-sit was actually to just raise awareness, and say, ‘If something’s going to happen to this community, it’s not going to happen in silence.’ That’s one of the ways racism is still alive in our world today is in the media, you know: ‘Who cares about some farmers in South central?’ But you bring in some celebrities, you start a tree-sit and get attention happening, and all of a sudden people care.

It’s a sad reality.

We wanted to empower that particular community and those farmers to not feel alone, and to feel that in watching over themselves, they could grow in what community meant. And that’s why we called the tree-sits ‘community watchtowers.’ We raised \$10 million in a month — we did everything you could imagine to save that farm. It got bulldozed, but the beauty is it didn’t get bulldozed in silence, and other farms continue to go up around that community. For me, what these tree-sits are about is taking a stand for what we love. We want to achieve results, but it’s beyond results... It’s about living our lives on purpose and having meaning that lights us.

You seem to embrace nonviolence on a deep level. What do you think about the role of nonviolence in a tree-sit campaign? And what do you think about someone who



Butterfly took to the trees and fasted for over 22 days in June 2006 in an effort to help save the South Central L.A. Farm. (Photo by Joel Carranza)

approaches it differently, such as Running Wolf, who is willing to defend himself and the tree with physical force?

There is no one tactic that works everywhere, every time. If I'd done my tree-sit in certain parts of South America, they would have cut me out of the tree and killed me long before I'd been up there enough to become a martyr for a movement. One of the reasons Gandhi was so successful was he was extremely strategic. His *ahimsa* philosophy was about 'soul force' as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. put it. Both of them were brilliant people. It wasn't just a philosophy of people who had their feet firmly planted in the clouds, but of people who had their feet firmly planted in reality.

I personally don't use the word 'nonviolence.' Why would we use two negative words to describe a very positive movement? Why would we choose to define ourselves by what we're against instead of what we're for? Nonviolence is the people's way to try to articulate *ahimsa*, which is better defined as: 'To live so fully and completely in love that there's no room for anything else to exist,' which is much more powerful. It gives me goose bumps every time I say it! *Ahimsa* is to breathe so much oxygen into love that there's not enough oxygen for the fire of hatred to exist. That to me is revolution; that to me is activism.

It looks different everywhere you go, because sometimes there's a conversation of: 'What kind of soul force is loving and yet firm? And what kind of soul force is more malleable, like water wearing away at the stone?' That's where the strategy comes in. If you're a tree-sitter in Berkeley, and you're in a tree

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things because that's not an expression of love, you know? And it's dealing with people who are trying to take my life and being present with them; it's dealing with my own humanity, because I'm a human being, and sometimes I get frustrated or angry, and choosing to be present in love with myself when myself is showing up as something other than loving. It's a much more empowering way to live your life versus, 'How do I not react to something somebody else is doing to me right now?'

Resources:

- South Central Farmers: www.southcentralfarmers.org
- South Central Farm photos: <http://www.flickr.com/search/?q=south+central+farm>
- You can listen to the full interview at www.calpeacepower.org

that a cherry picker can come get your butt out of, there's not a lot of strategy in fighting. You're going to get taken down, and if you fight it [with physical force], you're going to end up with felony counts. So for me it's do everything I can do [without] getting caught, and then when I get caught, make them do the work. I was arrested in Ecuador, and when I was arrested, I was forcibly removed from the country — the president demanded I be removed. But I didn't willingly walk. The way for my love to be firm [in that situation] was to sit down... and I know you're going to remove me, but I'm not going to walk, and I'm not going to fight, and I'm not going to attack. So that's my view on soul force.

'To live my life so fully and presently in love that there's no room for anything else to exist' includes everything, every act, every word, every thought, and my entire life is transformed from that awareness. I don't use disposables — not because I'm trying to be 'granolier than thou,' it's because to live so fully and presently in love, I can't cut down a tree for a napkin. I can't extract the life force of Mother Earth in the form of petroleum for plastic, I can't do those