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Simeon the Stylite, Julia Butterfly Hill, and the Sacred Quest for the Well-Being of All

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Scaling the Heights of Peace and Justice:
Simeon the Stylite, Julia Butterfly Hill, and the Sacred Quest for the Well-Being of All

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An Essay in Honor of Dr. Arthur Holder

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In a world of environmental catastrophe, perennial war, growing poverty, systemic racism and many other forms of structural violence, we are each called to be makers of justice and peace. As difficult as this may be, our job description as human beings includes seeing, challenging and transforming the cycle of retaliatory violence and injustice in our selves, our homes, our communities, between nations and in our relationship with the earth.

Changing the world is our job. If we took this seriously, we would regard it as normal, and as unremarked upon, as breathing. Most of the time, however, it is extraordinary and dramatic, even shocking and scandalous. Why? Because acts of compassion and justice typically undermine double standards that consciously or unconsciously award more power to some rather than others. Even when these acts are quantitatively small and performed in the course of our every day lives, they are qualitatively large because they fundamentally challenge the way the world is arranged and maintained.

This shock and scandal and cognitive dissonance are magnified even more when our peacemaking challenges fundamental social structures that uphold unjust or violent conditions and policies.

For example, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is regarded in general today as a national icon, a cultural hero, a revered visionary, and one of the greatest American citizens who ever lived, but when he was alive – and in the heat of nonviolent struggle -- he was regarded by numerous people as an "outside agitator," an unpatriotic Communist, and a political extremist. He was arrested over 200 times for breaking the law; he was accused of creating social disorder. He underwent ongoing public scrutiny and he deliberately trespassed the circle of magical immunity with which society surrounds and protects its unjust and violent policies.

In response to the charge that he was an "agitator" creating violence and disorder, Dr. King said that he was bringing the disorder that already existed out into the open so that it could be healed. In replying to the accusation that he was an "extremist," Dr. King curtly said, "I'm an extremist for love."

The ordinary work of making peace and justice carries with it the risk of being perceived as extraordinarily disruptive or even strange and bizarre. Part of the power of this kind of dramatic, publicly performed action lies precisely in its unusualness, its eccentricity.

Sometimes the strange or disconcerting thing or action paralyzes us or makes us want to ignore it or dismiss it. At other times, however, the unusual can loosen the grip of the familiar and, in spite of everything, open the possibility for peace and justice where none seemed possible before. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, the desegregation campaign in Birmingham, and the Voting Rights march from Selma to Montgomery, efforts that changed this country forever,

were extraordinarily startling – they were acts of faith and courage that unleashed an unexpected and thoroughgoing power for change.

To illuminate more deeply the path of peace, justice and sustainability that is both ordinary and extraordinary, let us reflect on the spirituality of two people who, though separated by 1500 years, engaged in parallel though somewhat different practices. These two people have been regarded bizarre and shocking in their own ways and in their own cultural settings. As with the case of Dr. King, they were regarded as extremists. Yet, as we will explore, this sense of "being out there" and literally being "over the top" contributed in unexpected ways to the mysterious and powerful process of creating justice and peace.

The first person is Simeon the Stylite, who lived in the 5th century C.E., a Christian desert monk who spent decades praying at the top of a column in the Syrian desert.

The second is Julia Butterfly Hill, alive today, who spent two years perched 180 feet up in a one-thousand-year old redwood tree in Northern California determined to keep it from being cut down.

Both were urged, in their own ways, to "scale the heights" – to leave solid earth, to rise above the conditions they had known their whole lives. They both engaged in startling and strange and unnerving and breath-taking action. And they did so not exactly knowing what they were doing. They both felt their way along into the mystery of what they were doing. And doing so, they sparked numerous unexpected transformations, personal and social.

Simeon the Stylite

At first glance, Simeon seems an unlikely focus for an essay reflecting on peace and justice. Regarded as a misanthrope and a masochist, Simeon has long been a poster-child for an extreme form of

asceticism marked by hatred of the body and rejection of the earth. His life of extreme fasting, his ceaseless exposure to the elements, and voluntarily-imposed exile from, and elevation above, the rest of humanity has, for 15 centuries, given ammunition to those critics of Christianity who conclude that this religion stresses life in heaven over our earthly existence and that the only way to this heavenly realm is to suffer sweetly and to get free, as soon as possible, from the earth and its inhabitants.

The twentieth century film director Luis Buñuel's movie about Simeon entitled *Simon of the Desert,* is, according to one film critic, an examination of

> unnaturalness and hypocrisy associated with religious fanaticism and extremism… In the end, it's the persistent Devil who finally brings Simon back to earth, transporting him to a New York discothèque where the new dance rage is "the latest and the last" dance called the "Radioactive Flesh." The actual puniness of this "high and mighty" man (and all of us) is bluntly revealed. [This is a] unique film, which, in its effect, should encourage all of [hu]mankind to get off its own inflated pedestal and start searching for true reality.[18]

To explore this eccentric, let us first examine the sources. Three books that tell the life story of Simeon come down to us from the 5th Century CE. The first was written by Theodoret of Cyrrhus in 444, while Simeon was still alive. The next was written by Simeon's disciple, Antonius (the exact date is not known); and the third was penned by an anonymous Syriac Christian in 473. It is from these three more or less contemporaneous texts that we are provides with the following details of the life and practices of Simeon the Stylite—"stylite coming from the Greek word *stylos* meaning "column"—summarized by Christian spirituality scholar, Herbert Thurston:

[18] "Luis Buñuel's Cinema of Entrapment in the Age of Cowardice: The Search for a Greater Truth."): http://users.hal-pc.org/~questers/JAVA/fire/Bunuel.html

Simeon…was born about 388 at Sisan, near the northern border of Syria. After beginning life as a shepherd boy, he entered a monastery before the age of sixteen, and from the first gave himself up to the practice of an austerity so extreme and to all appearance so extravagant, that his brethren judged him, perhaps not unwisely, to be unsuited to any form of community life.

Being forced to quit them he shut himself up for three years in a hut at Tell-Neschin, where for the first time he passed the whole of Lent without eating or drinking. This afterwards became his regular practice and he combined it with the mortification of standing continually upright so long as his limbs would sustain him. In his later days he was able to stand thus on his column without support for the whole period of the fast.

After three years in his hut, Simeon sought a rocky eminence in the desert and compelled himself to remain a prisoner within a narrow space less than twenty yards in diameter. But crowds of pilgrims invaded the desert to seek him out, asking his counsel or his prayers, and leaving him insufficient time for his own devotions. This at last determined him to adopt a new way of life. Simeon had a pillar erected with a small platform at the top, and upon this he determined to take up his abode until death released him. At first the pillar was little more than nine feet high, but it was subsequently replaced by others, the last in the series being apparently over fifty feet from the ground. However extravagant this way of life may seem, it undoubtedly produced a deep impression on contemporaries…

…The whole was exposed to the open air, and Simeon seems never to have permitted himself any sort of cabin or shelter. During his earlier years upon the column there was on the summit a stake to which he bound himself in order to maintain the upright position throughout Lent, but this was an alleviation with which he afterwards dispensed. Great personages, such as the Emperor Theodosius and the Empress Eudocia manifested the utmost reverence for the saint and listened to his counsels while the Emperor Leo paid respectful attention to a letter Simeon wrote to him… After spending thirty-six years on his pillar, Simeon died on Friday, September 2, 459.[19]

[19] Herbert Thurston, "St. Simeon Stylites the Elder," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company), 1912. http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13795a.htm

This life of extremes – being shut up in a hut for three years, passing the whole of Lent neither eating nor drinking, standing continually upright as long as his limbs would allow, being perched on a fifty foot column – has been typically interpreted as a form of grotesque restriction and suffering that somehow brings one closer to bring the spiritual, as a way to prevent the demands of the body from interfering with spiritual aspirations, governed by the assumption that the more the body suffers, the more the spirit flowers.[20]

Numerous contemporary theologians have critiqued this pillar spirituality as an example of a dangerous and dominant theme in Western Christian thought and practice that envisions the religious life as a process where the faithful flees the earth and climbs the rungs of a metaphysical ladder to a transcendent and hidden God. As the theologian Pseudo-Alcuin wrote, "The superior part of us seeks the heavens but the inferior remains clinging to the earth." This theology of ascendance was rooted, in part, in a peculiar reading of Jacob's dream recorded in the twenty-eighth chapter of Genesis. This dream, which features a ladder reaching to heaven on which angels are rising and descending, had as its primary focus Yahweh's promise that Jacob's progeny would be innumerable, not that the way to God is to ascend, rung by rung, upward to God by leaving the earth and its concerns. Nevertheless, this reading of the biblical image of the ladder eventually fused with the philosophy of the Greek Neo-Platonists that the spiritual journey was one of ascent to a realm of spirit in which matter was disdained.

Quite rightly, in our own time, theologians such as Matthew Fox and others have criticized this view of the spiritual life because it can reinforces the injustice and violence of top/down power arrangements; domination or "lording it over one another"; elitism; and a kind of rugged

[20] This conventional formulation is found in many places, including on a contemporary hagiographical website of saints' lives: http://users.erols.com/saintpat.

individualism where one goes off to work out one's salvation – or, today, one's lifestyle or one's existence – by oneself.

While it is true that the Syrian Christianity Simeon would have known (heavily influenced as it was by Manichaeanism, a philosophy that stresses a strict dualism between Good and Evil, and Matter and Spirit), stressed tranquility (*hesychia*), temperance (*encrateia*), and impassiveness (*apastheia*) and thus among its monastics de-emphasized attention to the needs and claims of the body, it is, I suggest, important for us to not simply conclude that this assumption about what Simeon was up to is the whole picture. After all, in the three books on Simeon's life, he actually never offers a direct explanation as to why he spent 30 years on a high platform exposed to all the elements engaged in what surely are puzzling and bizarre practices.

For a fuller picture, though, we turn to historian Peter Brown. In his highly influential essay, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," Brown argues that it is, at least, incomplete to simply dismiss Simeon as a bizarre "misanthrope and masochist."[21] Brown begins his investigation by asking what St. Simeon (and his fellow pillar-sitters who came after him and imitated this practice) say about Roman society during the fifth and sixth centuries. This is a period of social disorder, violence, and factionalism when social structures and authority had, in many locations, disintegrated. In this setting, according to Brown, Simeon and others like him came to function as powerful arbitrators and peacemakers for their localities. Why? Because they were strictly neutral: they lived apart from the town or village; they lived

[21] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity," in Peter Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 103-152. Brown uses the word "man" deliberately. In his essay, he documents how the rise of the "holy man" came to supersede the spirituality of women in late antiquity (p. 151): "…his rise was a victory of men over women, who had been the previous guardians of the diffuse occult traditions of their neighborhood. The blessing of the holy man, and not an amulet prepared by a wise woman, was what was now supposed to protect you from the effects of a green lizard that had fallen into your soup."

"above" humanity; and they were "God-bearing-beings" who could therefore be objective in adjudicating disputes. *Because* of his eccentricity -- which also spoke to those who observed them about the presence of God who preserved them in spite of the extremities they experienced – Simeon was revered. His way of life offered something few people had access to: objectivity, wisdom, and power to arbitrate in the midst of a cultural context where conflict resolution was not available from more overarching structures of social power. Brown writes:

> By the sixth century, we have already entered a world of carefully organized village processions, through which the holy man recaptured, by solemn junketing, the ancient ideal of the great benefactor, presiding over the good cheer of a united community. Above all, the holy man insisted that misfortune could be averted only by penance, and that penance meant, quite concretely, a "new deal" among the villagers.
>
> It is here that we meet Symeon…at work. What we know of Symeon's activity as a mediator in the villages is all the more impressive as our main source takes it entirely for granted. The Syrian author …was plainly concerned to add exotic trimmings to a local reputation so firmly established as hardly to bear repeating: Persian princesses, merchants from central Asia, Yemeni sheiks – these interested the writer and his audience more than did the constant trickle of delegations from neighboring villages, headed by their priest and elders, who trooped up the side of the mountain to hear "the lion roar" as to how they should order their affairs.
>
> It is only in passing that we learn that Symeon had law suits entrusted to his arbitration; that his curse had sanctioned water rationing in a large lowland village; and that he had negotiated an agreement on the collection of tithes – a thinly Christianized version of the running battle between urban landowners and villagers as to exactly how much of a crop should be taken and when it should be harvested.[22]

[22] Peter Brown, "The Rise and Function of the Holy Man," 127-128.

As Herbert Thurston summarizes the fifth century accounts:

> Even on the highest of his columns Simeon was not withdrawn from…his fellow [human beings]. By means of a ladder which could always be erected against the side, visitors were able to ascend; and we know that he wrote letters, the text of some of which we still possess, that he instructed disciples, and that he also delivered addresses to those assembled beneath.[23]

Byzantine historian Norman H. Baynes, also working with the original texts, writes that

> The night and the greater part of the day he spent in prayer, but twice a day he addressed the folk who thronged about the column, giving them moral counsel, settling their disputes, healing their diseases. Arabs, Persians and Armenians came on pilgrimage to the Saint; Christians came from Italy and Spain, from Gaul and from Britain. St. Geneviève of Paris wrote to him.[24]

In the texts about Simeon, his power was conveyed in innumerable miracle stories associated with these figures and in their feats of asceticism. These ascetical practices, however, were more than simply a kind of "credential." They also established his neutrality, as Peter Brown contends:

> The life of the holy man (and especially in Syria) is marked by so many histrionic feats of self-mortification that it is easy, at first sight, to miss the deep social significance of asceticism *as a long drawn-out, solemn*

[23] Herbert Thurston, "St. Simeon Stylites the Elder."

[24] Norman H. Baynes, "Medieval Sourcebook: The Life of Daniel The Stylite," in *Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies of St. Daniel the Stylite, St. Theodore of Sykeon and St. John the Almsgiver,* trans. Elizabeth Dawes (Crestwood: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1977). http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/dan-stylite.asp

ritual of dissociation – of becoming the total stranger (italics added).

> For the society around him, the holy man is the one who can stand outside the ties of family, and of economic interest; whose attitude to food itself rejected all ties of solidarity to kin and village that, in the peasant societies of the Near East, had always been expressed by the gesture of eating….The holy man drew his powers from outside the human race: by going to live in the desert, in close identification with an animal kingdom that stood, in the imagination of contemporaries, for the opposite pole of all human society. Perched on his column, nearer to the demons of the upper air than to human beings, Symeon was objectivity personified.[25]

Brown's interpretation of Simeon the Stylite creatively problematizes the traditional interpretations of Christian asceticism. He does this not by minimizing the extremity of these acts but by reframing their motivation, consequences, and meaning. From Brown's perspective, Simeon holds in tension *contemptus mundi* (*contempt for the world)* and *care for the world* – and it is the conventions of the so-called "contempt for the world" that makes possible this care for the world by authenticating his neutrality and by drawing people to the mysterious drama he constructs and performs.

Brown's interpretation of Simeon the Stylite's practices is richly suggestive. Simeon is driven by a particular concept of spirituality – an extreme deprivation and solitude – and his body and mind are gradually reconstructed through and on behalf of this "way." Significantly, it is this "reconstructed self" that leads to his becoming a source, not of isolation and privation, but transformed community, justice, and conflict resolution.

Within this light, Simeon is not entirely unlike Mohandas Gandhi who, in conducting long political fasts, endured many jail sentences, and embarked on long marches, also practiced a kind of asceticism that

[25] Ibid., 131-132.

"reconstructed" his self and led, eventually to the "reconstruction" of his nation. Just as Simeon can illuminate Gandhi's work as spiritual asceticism, so too can Gandhi's ascetical example perhaps help us understand Simeon's.

Julia Butterfly Hill

Now let us fast forward to the far end of the twentieth century. Julia Butterfly Hill spent two years perched in a redwood tree in the Headwaters Forest of Northern California seeking to prevent its being logged by Maxaam Corporation's Pacific Lumber Company.[26] From December 10, 1997 – when she first scrambled up Luna, a one thousand year old redwood – until December 18, 1999, Hill kept vigil 180 feet above the terrain that includes the earth's last unprotected groves of ancient redwood trees.[27] Hill's self-described "tree-sit," rooted in her acute vision of a wounded world longing for nonviolent healing,[28] was marked by an initial vow: "When I climbed Luna, I gave my word to her, the forests, and all people that I would not allow my feet to touch the ground until I felt I had done everything I possibly could to protect her and the forests."[29]

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[26] Sara Marand, "Spirit of the Redwoods: An Interview with Julia 'Butterfly' Hill," *Shaman's Drum*, No. 52 (Summer 1999), 23; also Glen Martin, "Tree-Sitter Recounts Life in the Clouds: Julia Butterfly Hill is Tearful and Triumphant," *San Francisco Chronicle*, A-21, A-24, Monday, December 20, 1999. See also Julia Butterfly Hill, *The Legacy of Luna: The Story of a Tree, A Woman, and the Struggle to Save the Redwoods* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).

[27] Hill in Marand, 27.

[28] Ibid., 23: "Along with many others, I am committed to a world that lives with love and respect for all life. I am committed to a world where all old-growth forests are permanently protected, where trees on steep, unstable slopes are spared from the saw, where clearcutting is replaced with true sustainable forestry, and where pesticide poisoning of the land, water, and people no longer exists."

[29] Ibid.

Hill explains that "Through a crazy series of events, I got involved with the tree-sit at Luna. I had no clue it was going to turn into what it has become. When I learned that this tree, which is over a thousand years old, was going to be cut down, I decided to go up into the tree."

Having no clue what would come of her decision to live among Luna's branches for two years, Hill integrated her maturing perception of and commitment to a holistic spirituality with an ongoing nonviolent action that directly interfered with logging but also did so in a way that respected the sacredness of all, including her purported opponents. Aloft among Luna's limbs, Hill found that

> From where I sit, I can see everything that we are fighting for and everything we are fighting against, in one view. …By not allowing my feet to touch the ground once during all this time, I've separated myself from the world down there. It has allowed me to tap, through the roots of this tree, into the heart of Mother Earth and to feel her pulsing power. …I feel that each of us is intricately enlaced with Mother Earth. We are all part of the body of life. …When we lose touch with that circle of power, we break the circle of magic and we break our ability to be part of that magic. …Some people have set themselves higher than the Earth… In order to do that, they have to desensitize themselves to the purpose and the power of the circle that we are. That's what allows people to destroy.[30]

These reflections came not from sitting in the safety and stability of her living room at home but by living voluntarily adrift in the canopy of a North American redwood forest for over two years with all the trappings of an ascetical practice that includes bodily vulnerability and relentless persistence, as indicated in her account:

> In the winter storms of 1997, there were some winds close to 90 M.P.H. Major branches were ripped off Luna in the wind. Part of my fort collapsed, and I was thrown

[30]Ibid., 24.

> several feet. Sleet and hail were flying through the tarps, which had ripped. I know that Luna had to be holding onto me very hard that night.
>
> I live at about 2,000 feet elevation… There's been a lot of sleet and hail. …One time I broke one of my toes, which caused frostbite, due to poor circulation.
>
> …I gauge the temperature by how many layers I have on. …It lets me know that I am really alive.[31]

As *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter Glen Martin put it:

> The top of a redwood tree is an exceedingly hostile environment for human beings. It is aggressively vertical; gravity claws at you whenever you move. It is always cold and damp; Hill was never truly dry during her two years in Luna. And it is cramped. Hill lived on two six-by-six-foot platforms. Luna's trunk was her sidewalk and her exercise treadmill.[32]

But aside from the privation flowing from Hill's limited "object choices" was the "fundamental option" that marked her unfolding witness:

> Even though I'd said good-byes to my best friends, thrown out everything I owned, and given up the life I had been living, I hadn't given up life. I hadn't given up my being. I was still trying to hold on to those. That night [during a fierce storm], I gave it all up. I talked to Luna, and I talked to the powers of the universe. I said, "Obviously this is a test. This is testing how committed I am to what I believe in." I said, "Okay, I give myself completely; you can have all of me. I'm really just part of the universe, anyway. If I die, all I'm doing is just giving myself to that from which I came."
>
> After that, my desire for things like running water just faded into the background. I don't think about those things anymore.[33]

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[31] Ibid., 24, 31.

[32] Martin, A-24.

[33] Hill in Marand, 31. For more on "object choice" and "fundamental option," see p. 168.

Hill's commitment was shaped in an ascetical crucible that invited her, in these peculiar circumstances, to let go of everything to witness to a truth that had revealed itself within over the months of her arboreal occupation. No one would have thought less of her if, in the midst of that storm, she had descended to the forest floor and sought out the safety of shelter. But she did not do so. Her decision literally to "hang in there" had come to have something to do with an evolving understanding of her own identity and how it was being shaped by taking this action:

> I chose the name Butterfly because I had a very spiritual experience with a butterfly when I was about six or seven. A butterfly landed on me when I was hiking in the woods, and it stayed on me for hours. …I couldn't have chosen a more apt name considering what's happened to me. I came up here a caterpillar, knowing nothing about Earth First!, Pacific Lumber, or Maxaam Corporation. All I knew was that these incredibly beautiful forests were becoming extinct. I knew that was wrong and it had to stop. For a year now, I've been living in a cocoon on Luna, and I've been metamorphosing into the butterfly that I'm becoming.[34]

Part of her metamorphosis was a gradual flowering of the spirit and practice of nonviolence. Slowly, she learned not to demonize the lumber company employees who were dispatched to harass her:

> When I was placed under siege last year, dozens of security men were yelling horrible things at me. They were blowing air horns and bugles in the night to keep me awake. They were threatening that if I didn't come down right away, they were going to beat the living hell out of me when I did come down. …I sang a song to them every time they got mean and horrible, and the song says, *Love in any language, straight from the heart, pulls the thought together, never apart, and once we long to speak it, all the world will hear that lover in any language is fluently spoken here*. …The whole time they were being terrible, I was doing my absolute best to respond to them with love.

---

[34] Hill in Marand, 27-28.

> That siege came during the winter storms, when I was getting pummeled with sleet and hail. It was a crazy time, and I had just made it through a period of helicopters trying to rip off my tarps and blow me out of the tree. …Instead of reacting to their anger and methods, I just sang to them about love. I think that's part of the power of nonviolence.
>
> Some of the men who had been screaming and yelling at me began to change their tone of voice when they dealt with me. That was actually a big change, especially for those men. Others began changing not only their tone, but also their words. They went from cussing me out to saying, "Well, I don't like what you're doing, but I respect your courage and tenacity." I think I even won some of them over as friends.[35]

This nonviolent spirit grew out of her growing relationship with Luna and the wisdom this millennium-old tree seemed to be imparting:

> Every time a tree fell, it just ripped out a part of me, and for a while I was really overwhelmed with sadness, frustration, and anger. …One day, I started feeling the heart of Mother Earth. Soon I realized that I wasn't feeling so sad and angry, because I was being filled with the unconditional love of our Mother. No matter what we do to this planet, no matter how much we throw her care back into her face, she continues to love us by giving us life. By tapping into that realization and becoming one with nature, I began releasing all the concrete and steel barriers that I had been carrying. That's changed me. I'll never be the person I was when I first came up here.[36]

In her book entitled, *The Legacy of Luna*, Hill charts how this nonviolent spirit led her to reach out to John Campbell, the president of Pacific Lumber, and how they crafted a resolution. After many phone calls (Hill used a cell-phone that had been given to her) Campbell traveled out to

[35] Hill in Marand, 28-29. In December, 1999, when she finally descended from Luna, Hill re-affirmed her nonviolent attitude toward her so-called "adversaries": "[Maxaam Corporation president Charles] Hurwitz is a master chess player," Hill observed. "He's brilliant – I felt like I was his pawn so many times. If he ever got in touch with his heart, he could do amazing work." Quoted from Gary Martin, A-24.

[36] Hill in Marand, 28.

meet Hill. This led to eight months of negotiation that spared Luna and established a buffer around her. She charts how hostility gave way, in the face of her relentless persistence and staying put, to openness and then dialogue and then a settlement.

In December, 1999 Hill slowly rappelled down the side of the tree that had been her home for 738 days. Deciding that her mission had been accomplished, Hill closed this chapter of her public environmental activism.[37]

Julia Butterfly Hill's decision to make her home among the branches of an ancient redwood threatened with destruction was an act in which each of its dimensions, including the potential physical consequences to Hill herself, synergistically reinforced one another. From the moment she shimmied up Luna's trunk and spiraled upward to the roof of the forest, Hill constructed a "practice" in which its power derived in part from the potential risk to her own bodily integrity. Hers was an embodied message conveying solidarity with Luna: *I am willing to gamble my life because Luna's life is endangered; even: Luna's extinction (writ large) means my extinction (writ large)*. The power that this relatively simple act generated – worldwide media coverage via the *New York Times*, ABC News, NBC News, the *London Times* and other press agencies;[38] energizing the environmental movement in general and the Headwaters Forest campaign in particular, which likely factored into the agreement reached in March, 1999 between Maxaam and the Clinton administration by which the company agreed to sell the U.S, government 7,470 acres of the forest; and even the settlement Hill herself reached with Maxaam in lieu of a more confrontative police

[37] The settlement included Hill and her supporters making a $50,000 payment to Pacific Lumber, which in turn the company donated to California State University Humboldt for scientific research. Hill agreed never to trespass on the company's land, but reserved the right to visit Luna on 48 hours' notice to the company. See Gary Martin, A-24.

[38] Marand, 23.

assault on her perch – is rooted in large measure in those risks. What I am calling an "ascetical regimen" was implicit in Hill's effort from the beginning – an effort which, with longevity and endurance, generated a gentle, nonviolent power.

At the same time, this form of asceticism should not be disconnected from its political meaning, as interpreters of asceticism sometimes are guilty of doing. Hill was dedicated to preventing the actual destruction of an actual tree. Hers was not simply a symbolic witness against environmental devastation in general; her effort was motivated and sustained by the particularity of the threat. Yet simultaneously her concerns reached beyond this particularity to the entire biosphere and the inhabitants it havens. Fortunately for her, Luna spaciously provided Hill a vast contemplative period of retreat and spiritual formation to be schooled in the intricacies of the kind of transformation that she came to see would be required to ensure environmental protection. Her spirituality (a process of tapping into what she characterizes as the flow of Mother Earth's positive, life-sustaining energy) conditioned and reconstructed her politics (returning hatred from her opponents with love). Just as the fourth century C.E. desert fathers and mothers spoke of the eremitical cell as a school of charity,[39] so Hill claims that her growth in understanding (framed metaphorically as the metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly) has been fostered by her symbiotic relationship with Luna who, for two years, functions as teacher, protector, and tacit role model.

There are cultural and performative dimensions of this action in its rounded "wholeness" that also shape its asceticism. Even though some people in the larger society might be tempted to dismiss Hill's "tree-sit" as either an exhibitionist stunt or as a dangerous and misguided form of obstruction, the emergence and strength of the

[39] Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 261 ff.

environmental movement over the last three decades has created a framework for at least "seeing" this act and even interpreting it as a plausible, if extra-legal, response to ecological disaster. In other words, it can be viewed as a cultural figure set against a cultural ground where such behavior is at least broadly intelligible and even, in certain situations, permissible.

In turn, this cultural option is reflected and reinforced in the performative pattern Hill deploys. Hill fuses the tactics of environmental nonviolent direct action (pioneered by Greenpeace and other groups) with the methods of groups like Peace Brigades International (PBI) and Witness for Peace who offer "protective accompaniment" in war zones.[40] Her performance, like that of PBI, is "staged" within the living context of the one who is threatened. While still other, Hill as nonviolent actor "performs" symbiotically as both protector *and* protected. Her performance is enacted above the earth – "From where I sit, I can see everything that we are fighting for and everything we are fighting against, in one view" – but not disconnected from the earth. This performance offers a comprehensive view that is, not, however, Olympian, remote, or abstract. Instead, she acknowledges, learns from, and professes a certain transformation through a transaction with the living power of the earth that "enlaces" everything, including Luna, herself, and even those who would destroy both of them.

[40] On Peace Brigades International, see Daniel N. Clark, "Transnational Action for Peace: The Peace Brigade International," *Transnational Perspectives* 9, no. 4 (1983): 7-11.Patrick G. Coy, "Protective Accompaniment: How Peace Brigades International Secures Political Space and Human Rights Nonviolently" in V.K. Kool, ed., *Nonviolence: Social and Psychological Issues* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1994). Liam Mahoney and Luis Enrique Eguren, *Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights* (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1997). On Witness for Peace, see Ed Griffin-Nolan, ed., *Witness for Peace: A Story of Resistance* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

Simeon and Julia: Aloft and Side by Side

While the practices of Julia Butterfly Hill and Simeon the Stylite, despite being separated by 1500 years, share a variety of dimensions: an over the top verticality, voluntary extremity, involvement in justice and peacemaking, and the process of individualism giving way to the drawing near of others seeking wisdom or at least explanation. It would, though, be unwise to reduce their actions to some kind of an archetypical or essentialist symbolism, gesture, or religiosity – that, for example, they are tapping into the spiritual power of what the historian of religions Mircea Eliade named the cross-cultural symbols of the Tree of Life, the Axis of the World, or the Ladder Between Heaven and Earth, like the power the Monolith exerted on the monkeys and humans in Stanley Kubrick's film, *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Of course, whatever their formal similarities, there are many differences between them, as would be expected with the yawning cultural and religious chasm of 1,500 years that separates them.

First, their acts are rooted in sharply differing worldviews, spiritualities, and horizons of meaning. While Simeon bridges the gulf between heaven and earth (reflecting early Christianity's three story universe) in his own body, Hill's body manifests and instantiates the ineluctable unity of the inspirited world as reflected in the cosmology of contemporary New Age spiritualities. Second, their orientations toward self (and social location) stand in marked contrast. While Simeon strives for social objectivity, Hill is a fervent partisan for Luna and the entire natural world. While justice in Simeon's context demands neutrality, in Hill's it requires a form of compassionate partiality. Finally, there is the difference in the longevity of their "performances," which likely represents a contrast in religious, cultural, and political forms and philosophies. Simeon has become the permanently available "God-bearing person," paradoxically distant and near at the same time. His

vocation is to remain on his column for 36 years until his death. Hill, in comparison, descends from her loft after just over two years. Hers was a circumscribed exercise pegged to the achievement of a just and life-saving resolution, in keeping with a modern construction of nonviolent campaigns and actions.

We contrast these actions not to reduce one to the other but to see how they might illuminate each other. Reflecting on Julia Butterfly Hill's "tree-sit" in light of Simeon the Stylite's mortification-inspired "summit diplomacy" deepens our grasp of Hill's practice as an ascetical exercise with political resonances. Reflecting on Simeon's vertical attenuation in light of Hill's joyful and compassionate learning curve may yield a contemporary (if admittedly distorted) window on the delight that the stylite might have experienced at the physical and existential pinnacle where spirituality and social order were estranged and yet discovered, on a regular basis, to be in intimate embrace.

Both actions stubbornly resist the domestication of their strangeness for, as Peter Brown might suggest, it is in their weirdness -- their implicit challenge to social arrangements and the socially-constructed self meant to fit amid those arrangements – that their power resides. For both practitioners and their larger audiences, ascetical practices can defamiliarize the familiar and, at least momentarily, familiarize the strange, the foreign, and the utterly mysterious.

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