

## Thoughts on Somatics and the Earth Body

By Jamie McHugh

I recently had the pleasure of hearing Julia Butterfly Hill speak to a capacity crowd at the College of Marin. Julia was the young woman who sat for 738 days in a thousand year-old redwood tree in Northern California to protest the clear-cutting of old-growth forests. In recounting her story to demystify all the romantic media portrayals, she insisted on defining herself as an ordinary person who heeded the passion in her and rose to the challenge of using that feeling to commit to action. After a near-fatal car crash followed by 10 months of rehabilitation turned her life upside down, she embarked on her search for purpose. Her personal crisis became a quest for meaning that ultimately led her to the redwoods and to tree she named Luna.

What is extraordinary for me about Julia is not that she endured the ordeal of sitting in Luna at such a young age (she was 25 when she began), but that once down on the ground again she continued her commitment to a life of service. Luna taught her to ground herself in love, to sink her roots into the ground and the shared body of life so she could withstand the winds of turbulence – within and without. Supported and strengthened by the daily practice of prayer and remembering the purpose she is serving helps her tolerate the ongoing challenge of being considered weird by the larger culture. Grounding ourselves in love, she reminded us, is a highly disciplined act. It is much easier to withdraw, hate, or go back to sleep.

*The work we do on ourselves is for the benefit of all sentient beings.* Heeding her message: how can I awaken to my own “hero” instead of projecting that role onto someone else and letting myself off the hook? As an American who is gifted with so much privilege, how can I honor the abundance of the planet by taking more responsibility for my habits of consumption? The investigation of the body and the psyche helps liberate and focus the energy needed for doing my work in the world with integrity. It is important to remember a larger vision and not just use these opportunities for my own personal comfort or narcissistic fulfillment. Certainly, we all need a refuge, a personal shelter, to restore ourselves; we all need comfort and nurturing. But can I remember, and act on behalf of, the larger circle?

*A free body cannot be controlled by political orthodoxy. A free body derives its pleasure and sustenance from Nature, God and other human beings. A free body is not bound to the materialist, consumer-driven illusion of satisfaction. A free body has consciously re-formed itself to be engaged with life now rather than replicate its conditioning and continue to live in the past. A free body is informed by the fluid movement of love. But a free body is only one step in the larger liberation of our human spirit.*

Each day we are challenged to be a wise body in a body-phobic culture, to breathe, move, wiggle and hum. Each day we are called upon to manage our energy with mindfulness and treat our bodies compassionately as a way of giving thanks to the Creator for this miracle of life. Each day we are challenged to be a wise consumer of natural resources in an increasingly nature-phobic culture, to make choices about our use of water, autos, paper and plastics. Each day we are called upon to manage our desires and treat the Earth responsibly as a way to give thanks to the Creator.

No matter how often I get grounded, centered and free in my body, it is irrelevant if I don't also attend to my larger body - the planet Earth. If I am not consistently acting on behalf of the Earth body in the same way I am acting on behalf of my individual body, I am not acknowledging the source of my power. How can I think of myself as a spiritual person if, through my daily actions, I contribute to the desecration of our sacred planetary home? Somatic awareness and action are embedded at the source with our connection to the planet in the shared body of life. This awareness can also contribute to our human relationships as we remember the importance of embodying connectedness and experiencing community somatically.

*I am walking in Zurich with 400 people as part of the annual "Walk for Life", an AIDS fund-raiser. As we come to the Linderhof, a tree-lined plaza on a hill in the center of the old town, on top of Roman ruins, I lead the group in a spiral dance. It animates the energy of the group, to be suddenly broken out of the familiar walk and the small groups of known friends, to hold hands, to see and feel the group body starting to spiral around the old trees. In this simple form, people begin to acknowledge each other, to smile and laugh, as we journey inward to the center of the circle, and then out into the world again. I was once again reminded of the simplicity and power of community action, and the power of the dance to connect and renew.*

This dance reminds me of our basic biological reality, the cellular dance of coming together and moving apart, merging and individuating, in coherent patterns of relationship. Human beings have always danced and sung in ritual to affirm the power of the larger collective body, reminding me that movement doesn't just begin and end in our individual bodies. We are in a dynamic relationship with our social and natural environments, and are constantly affected and informed by these exchanges. Everyone speaks about being stressed out these days. Are we stressed, or actually just blessed with an overabundance of energy seeking creative fulfillment and connection? In these days of increasing isolation, the rituals of belonging and the dance of community can evoke the memory of organismic unity in our individual selves. Somatic psychology and human growth experiences that become enmeshed in the individualistic values of

contemporary Western culture are missing an essential element: our interconnectedness with each other and the earth body. Our individual somatic support, psychological articulation and spiritual potential are equally dependent upon, and informed by, our relationships.

As the mystic Meister Eckhart said: *"If the only prayer you ever said was Thank You, that would be enough."*  
Thank you Julia for inspiring me with your story, and initiating my own questions and actions in response.

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