

## **A Reflection on Julia**

By Yonatan Neril

I had the privilege of being Julia's debate partner and friend and remember Julia as energetic, intelligent, articulate, motivated, eager to learn, and funny.

Like Julia, I grew up in the coastal hills of Lafayette, and attended Stanley Intermediate School. There we were influenced by the same teacher, Bob Athayde. His classes exposed both of us to deep lessons on how to act righteously and be a good person.

Julia and I began as debate partners in June 1997 at the University of Maryland Debate Institute, and then attended the Dartmouth Debate Institute together the next summer. We invested hundreds of hours that year researching renewable energy use and climate change, and then debated over 100 debate rounds on the topic as part of the College Preparatory School debate team. Since our 'affirmative case' argued that climate change is a reality and human-caused, we became well-informed about climate science. As the 2nd Affirmative, Julia had the formidable responsibility of concluding all of our affirmative arguments, including against teams that were much more experienced. In debate after debate, I witnessed her passion and erudition in arguing our case in speeches and in conducting cross-examinations. My experience as Julia's debate partner on this topic was very meaningful, impacting the direction of university studies and the area of work in which I am now engaged.

Not only was Julia one of the fastest speakers in U.S. high school debate, but she was also was one of the smartest. As her debate partner, I watched many of our competitors tremble after she delivered the fastest speech they had ever heard, and then faced the monumental task of responding within a time limit to her dozens of cogent arguments. One of the highlights for us personally was completing the first day at the 'Tournament of Champions' as a sophomore and junior respectively with a 4-0 record. We also placed second at the Northwestern Round Robin and at the Long Beach tournament.

Debate was fun, and we enjoyed working, strategizing, debating together, making jokes as part of our debate speeches, and laughing at each other's jokes. I recall how when teams would quote from scientists saying that human-caused climate change doesn't exist, Julia would read evidence detailing the contributions those scientists received from oil companies, and the judge and I would have a good laugh. I remember her smile, her voice, and her handwriting.

I was a grade above her and almost two years older than her, and because of this, she afforded me a level of respect. In some ways she looked up to me, but now I am the one who is learning from her. I want to reflect on something our debate coach, Ryan Mills, wrote about Julia as our teacher: "...she was the one who had had it right all along. The importance of people not things; your integrity, not your successes; your contributions, not your awards. In an activity which breeds so many takers, Julia was a true giver."

The car accident and Julia's passing was a significant moment in my life, spurring me to appreciate the life that I have, and accelerating my own spiritual journey. I have been living in Israel since 2003, and want to share a teaching from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks about the geography of the Holy Land that relates to being a giver, like Julia was. He writes, "There are two seas in Israel: the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. The latter is full of life: fish, birds, vegetation. The former, as its name suggests, contains no life at all. Yet they are both fed by the same river, the Jordan. The difference, he said, is that the Sea of Galilee receives water at one end and gives out water at the other. The Dead Sea receives but does not give. The Jordan ends there. To receive without reciprocating is a kind of death. To live is to give."<sup>1</sup>

Julia's desire to give was clearly evident in her life, and also in her passing, as she passed life to several people through organ donation—an act of literally giving of herself. I now realize that Julia was altruistic at her core. She is teaching me what it really means to live.

Which leads me to the Julia Burke Foundation. Around 2005, Marilyn Burke and I had a conversation in Walnut Creek, and the idea of an Interfaith Center for Sustainable Development (ICSD) was born. Today ICSD accesses the collective wisdom of the world's religions to promote co-existence, peace, and sustainability through education and action.

One of Julia's favorite quotations was from George Bernard Shaw: "Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations." On the Julia Burke Foundation website, I was struck by the photo of her swimming with a sea turtle, which is considered a "living fossil," having appeared on Earth 200 million years ago. Sea turtles have the longest life-span of all the animals (up to 175 years old). Today, they are endangered. Passing life on earth to future generations is what defines sustainability. Thus one of Julia's favorite quotes speaks to ICSD and the Julia Burke Foundation's support of interfaith work to advance sustainability.

The Maharal of Prague, a 16th century Jewish Sage, taught that a good name has no death, because a person's name teaches about the spiritual essence which is separate from the physical. The Julia Burke Foundation perpetuates Julia's good name and spiritual essence through its philanthropy. I am honored and feel privileged that the work of ICSD can help perpetuate Julia's good name in the world by linking her name with actions that advance a more tolerant humanity and a livable planet for future generations.

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<sup>1</sup> [To Heal a Fractured World](#), p. 41