

J U D I T H

# Ground Zero

Photos: Kwok Yee

Early on July 24 last year **JUDITH HUNT** lost her house to a freak fire. Luckily neither she nor husband Jack Sonnabaum were there. She speaks to **Jaffa Elias** about what the experience has taught her.



*The burnt house ...*

**W**e had dedicated our house to the Dharma because we couldn't see any sense in people our age getting a house, filling it with goods and then clutching it to ourselves. People would come to stay, and from the time of His Holiness the Dalai Lama's California teachings in May 2001 on, the house was always full – the only night it was empty was the night it burned. Isn't that amazing?

While the house burnt, Jack was with his mother in San Diego, and I was listening to Lama Zopa Rinpoche's teachings on the *Diamond Cutter Sutra* at Land of Medicine Buddha, Soquel, California. The teaching didn't finish until 2 A.M., after which I left for San Francisco with Ven. Chokyi to stay at the nuns' house. We didn't get there until 4.30 A.M. By then the house was done for.

Jack got the call from Cindie Gillaspie, close friend and neighbor, to tell him everything was gone. He didn't know where I was and called everybody. The suggestion was that I was in the house because my car was there!

Meanwhile I was on my way home with friend Aliko Nico-laides. Just a few streets away, she answered her car phone. "We

have to pull over," she said. "Don't be ridiculous, Aliko," I countered, "We're almost home." She pulled over and gave me the phone. It was Jack. "Have you heard the news?" he said. "The house is gone, everything's gone, the animals are gone." And I said, "Oh My God," and completely spontaneously, I took refuge. My mind just went directly there – my poor, scattered, miserable mind did what it was supposed to do! After some Tara mantras, we fired up the car and went "home."

I didn't look at my house – I went straight to Cindie and Don's. When Jack arrived we went together. We looked at it and said, "Isn't this interesting." The fire was internal – there must have been a bonfire inside. When the windows started to crack, sounding like pistol shots, a neighbor woke up at 4 A.M., called 911 and then the fire engines came. No one knows the cause of the fire – it was probably wiring.

## DEALING WITH LOSS AND GAIN

Surprisingly what's happened hasn't made us miserable. People thought we were in denial, but it was never that way. We weren't exactly joyful, we were numb – but we never did collapse. In a way our first year in the States after Japan was

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much harder. We were more neurotic then – we didn't know America, couldn't get work for a whole year. This time however what happened didn't really make us neurotic.



*And a blossoming garden*

In fact I felt some weird freedom. In Japan the American School had paid to ship everything we owned, and I didn't even want everything I owned. So it was all shipped to America, and stored in the basement of that house, many boxes which were never opened. I felt like a failed Buddhist with all these goods! So I felt this kind of freedom, even though I didn't know what the future held, where we were going to live, or anything. We had nothing! Imagine the effect on the mind!

The things in our little daypacks became so valuable. I had a pillow, a Dharma book and a shawl. Jack had a small bag with a change of clothes in it. I missed my phone book, then the computer and then the telephone! Then we realized all the Dharma books were gone.

By the next morning (we stayed at Cindie and Don's) people were at the door with clothes and food. Then furniture started arriving. The generosity was unbelievable, it never stopped, it hasn't stopped yet. People came with everything – and people sent donations and gifts from Singapore, Hong Kong, England, Japan and Nepal. The whole thing about practicing gratitude fell into place – it was total gratitude – and the

whole thing about generosity, and people getting merit from generosity. So there we were emptied out, and here we are accumulating.

Wearing one's neighbors' clothes is quite an experience – it made the neighbors happy. At school the teachers came every day with carrier bags full of clothes too. The neighbors also held the 'mother' of all garage sales for us, and Ven. Robina Courtin held a teaching-benefit. Slowly we had a little fund. The insurance company also gave us a small amount of money, because, of course, you had to have tooth-brushes! People later brought Dharma books by the bag full, and Buddha statues.

## B L E S S I N G S O F L A M A S

Of course we had the lamas, the blessings of the buddhas, from the very beginning. Tse Chen Ling's Geshe Dakpa came right away. He said, "Be so happy that this has ripened on your house and not on your body!" He told us about his own experience in leaving Tibet and his monastery going up in flames. We then went out to dinner and celebrated because we were alive.

We met Lama Zopa Rinpoche at the airport. "Now I want you to build a Mandala house," he said. A Mandala house, we researched, was one with no 90-degree angles. We saw that as his invitation to us to rebuild the house, and offer it, which we intend to do. He also suggested we build a stupa.

Arjia Rinpoche came to choose the spot for the stupa. He also made prayers for the animals – our dog Dolma and cat Tsultrim who had died of smoke inhalation. They were in a black plastic bag when we picked them up from the Humane Society. Jack suggested we take the bag off, and we discovered layers of bags, which we peeled off one by one. We didn't have the courage to take the last one off, so we just placed them in a hole. Rinpoche made beautiful prayers – what is it with these stray animals from Japan that the abbot of Kumbum is making prayers over them? The neighbors came, we threw flowers, and prayed. Then Rinpoche whispered in my ear – "Judith, it would be very good to take the plastic bag off." I thought, "Oh my gosh, I'm going to have to do it." When we did, their little bodies were there but we felt they weren't really there. Arjia Rinpoche had also left Tibet with absolutely nothing – he had three cars there – he is so humble living now in other people's houses – a great inspiration.

Nyichang Rinpoche drove three hours from Sonoma, made puja, and then turned around and went all the way back. The lamas' presence gave great comfort – I think this was the key – these holy people came and said, "It's OK – good things will come from this." That's the Tibetan point of view.

## W H A T D O W E D O N O W ?

"Let's take the insurance money, buy a Winnebago and follow the Dharma for the rest of our lives," I told Jack.

"No," he said, "we have to get the money, rebuild the house, sell it and then follow the Dharma for the rest of our lives." And I said, "Well, what if we don't live that long?" There are all these questions. What should I do now I'm free? It would have been perfectly OK with me if he said, "Yes, let's get the truck and go." However I think his idea is good too because the insurance company pays five percent more if you rebuild.

In addition to collecting insurance on the house, there's collecting insurance on your possessions. Our possessions continue to haunt us because they have to be listed for the insurance company otherwise we won't get our money. Every week we sit for hours with an agent making lists of what was in every drawer. It's taxing!

We live in a little house a few blocks from our old house. We rented from a young man who chose us over the many who wanted the house, because his parents had once been burned out and he knew what that felt like. We could completely furnish it with given things. This gets you into a fix because you watch your mind trying to struggle for normalcy, trying to fill in and get back what you had. A more renounced mind however could have felt even more free and joyful!

In the evenings we walk over to our old house. On a drip system, the garden has run wild. It is so breathtaking – the salvia, the roses – like paradise, and just over is this stinky, burned house. Ven. Damcho came from Boston, put on rubber gloves and mask, and spent three days digging things out of the ashes. We found all our statues – all burnt – carpets, even some treasures we could recover. Yesterday I found an old pouch with Lama Yeshe's letters. Fires are quirky. Several things like that survived the fire. We never found the bathtub or the kitchen sink.

The Dharma program has started again (Judith and Jack's house became an annex to San Francisco FPMT center Tse Chen Ling). Ven. Monlam teaches Buddhism 101 to Christian ministers and others, there's a good crowd for meditation on Thursdays and Geshe Dakpa comes once a month.

### A STRONG LEARNING CURVE

When all your worldly goods disappear it is a very strong learning curve! You get a realization that samsara is shallow, and is impermanent. I would say that's our major benefit – not that we've done a whole lot about it – here we are in another house full of beautiful things! You do get a sense though of how much energy we put into creating these environments to live in. We put a lot of energy into it – not as much as some. On the other hand, we'd go walking at night, and here we would be having nothing, and all these people would be in their houses with their cosy little windows and their lights burning, and we thought, "Oh they don't have a clue" – because at night we'd be out there with nothing

A verse in the Six Session Yoga says, "For the sake of my mothers, I will give away without regret, home, body possessions,

money and my collections of virtue..." and now that line began to make really good sense. I realize I couldn't really totally renounce but I had been given the opportunity to do it. This was the time, I told Jack, that we could live in Nepal, we could be yogis, do the real thing, but instead we find ourselves re-building.

And yet we feel so blessed. This experience has intensified our practice. Our faith in the Dharma and buddhas has definitely increased, and we find we sit quite easily.


After September 11 we feel we were bombed out twice – we're bombed out and the country's bombed out. I find myself thinking very much about all the suffering worldwide. We're surrounded by it. The Dharma is the only relief. Here in San Anselmo it is so beautiful, the sun is shining and everyone is going about their general business, but it is temporary – things have changed. ☸

Originally from England, Judith Hunt now lives in San Anselmo, California and teaches in a Catholic middle school. Before that she was at the American School in Japan for 18 years. At Lama Yeshe's behest she spent a year in Nepal to teach a bevy of young monks hygiene, embroidery and English, thus earning the affectionate nickname *Amala* (Tibetan: mother).



Judith Hunt and Jack Sonnabaum

Photo: Cindie Gillaspie




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