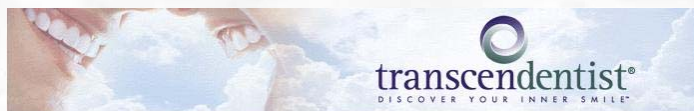


Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill



WEB PAGE:

<http://transcendentist.com/pressroom/eastbayexpress.asp>

2004

You Say You Want a Resolution



from East Bay Express

**Bummed out about the 2004 election results? Julia Butterfly Hill has some advice: Stop waiting for a savior. Start fixing things yourself.
BY SAM HURWITT**

It was a low-key Sunday afternoon in UC Berkeley's Sproul Plaza. A casual observer would not have suspected that Liberation Now!, the fourth annual conference of the Student Animal Rights Alliance, was under way on the second floor of the Student Union. Student activists had flown in from all over the country, and tables represented everyone from East Bay Animal Advocates to Romania Animal Rescue, but the final day of the three-day conference was nonetheless a bit quiet. Small wonder, too; it was Halloween, Sunday, and a beautiful day to boot.

www.juliabutterfly.com

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

All things considered, it was impressive that about a hundred students dragged themselves out of the sunshine to hear Julia Butterfly Hill speak on behalf of animals. Although she pointedly describes herself as a "joyous vegan" to counteract the perception of vegans as dour and miserable, animal rights isn't necessarily her pet issue. Hill is, of course, best known for speaking for the trees. For more than two years, she lived high in the branches of a thousand-year-old redwood to protest and prevent the clear-cutting of old-growth redwoods in Humboldt County.

As courageous as Hill's feat was -- living under a tarp on a six-by-eight-foot platform 180 feet above ground and enduring frostbite, gale-force El Niño storms, helicopter-borne antagonists, close shaves from falling trees, attempts by loggers to starve her out, and even calls to come down from some of the very people who organized her tree-sit -- the whole thing sounds like something you'd have to be a bit out of your tree to do. And indeed, just as the public hears primarily about those animal-rights activists who bomb research labs or throw red paint on ladies in furs, people who know little about Hill except that she took the name "Butterfly" and lived in a tree named "Luna" have often dismissed her as a hippie nutball.

So, while some observers hail her as an environmental icon, others stoke the disparaging stereotypes with glee. San Francisco Chronicle commentator Debra Saunders dismissed her as a lawless trespasser. Fox News personality Sean Hannity suggested a contradiction between saving trees and then selling books. Marc Morano observed in the *The Washington Times* that "only nutcakes live in trees feeling the pain of plants." And when Hill appeared on *Politically Incorrect* in April 2000 a few months after her descent, Republican political consultant and talk radio host Michael Graham took every opportunity to paint her as a crazy wood nymph: "When you were talking to the trees, I'm wondering if they mentioned to you, Julia -- because in your book you said the trees spoke to you ... that more trees have been planted every year since 1950 than harvested. Did any of that get mentioned by the tree while you were chatting?"

Hill is aware of the preconceptions people have about her, and she takes them in stride. "People come to see if I'm as much of a freak as they think I am," she told the animal-rights activists. Her sense of humor about herself is immediately disarming. When talking about her time in the tree during an interview, she laughed and said, "Doesn't that make you laugh when you

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

say it? To this day, when I say, 'Yeah, during my time in the tree,' I have to hold back an explosion of laughter."

Nor does she look like the long-haired, barefoot tree-hugger she once was. Her hair is cut short, with one silvery shock set off by her otherwise dark-brown bangs. She dresses sharply in a simple black T-shirt and pants, hoop earrings, and often tall black boots or a long blue denim coat. She often abandons her microphone early on to rely on her strong voice, practiced at projecting over large distances. She works the crowd like a stand-up comedian, making her audience participate, talking with her hands in broad gestures, walking around the stage. "I sat still for two long years, so I tend to be moving," she explains.

Once she finally came out of her tree, Hill hit the ground running. Almost immediately, she was on a plane to New York to meet the press, knowing it was her one opportunity for live, unedited media. "I knew that if I didn't go," she said, "it would be something along the lines of this: 'Julia Butterfly Hill has come down. The forests are safe. Yay, hurrah.' Click to commercial, everybody go back to shopping."

Five years later, she hasn't slowed down yet. Now thirty, she delivers about 250 presentations and travels more than 150 days a year, lending her presence and voice to a multitude of causes, events, and organizations. Last month alone, in addition to the animal-rights conference, she appeared at the opening of the Natural World Museum's exhibition of environmental art in the Presidio and later at its symposium on sustainability and culture. She addressed the Bioneers Conference and a Turn the Tide! youth activism event in San Rafael. She performed spoken word at Mystic Family Circus' Way of the Warrior benefit in San Francisco and again at a benefit for activist singer-songwriter Melissa Crabtree at Berkeley's Epic Arts. She appeared at the KPFA Peace Awards in Oakland and was a special guest at hip-hop poet Aya de León's political performance piece Aya de León Is Running for President at Laney College. She went out to Livermore to speak at the Earth Team student environmental leadership training weekend, and down to Los Angeles to speak at USC and appear at a Halloween costume party to help save the Westchester Bluffs.

But Julia Butterfly Hill has done much more than just talk. While still in the tree she founded Circle of Life, now an Oakland-based organization dedicated to activating ordinary people to make a difference in the world and to bringing activism into the mainstream. Part of the funds to launch

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

the nonprofit came from her best-selling book *The Legacy of Luna*, which also helped set in motion a small environmental revolution in book publishing. She recently inked a deal for a film adaptation of the memoir of her 738 days aloft, through which she hopes to set in motion similar changes to the environmental practices of Hollywood.

Among her more effective demonstrations of how a large-scale project can be produced without hurting the earth is the *We the Planet Festival*, an eco-friendly, zero-waste concert to be put on this Saturday in Oakland by Circle of Life. The first festival in Golden Gate Park last April featured performers Alanis Morissette, Bonnie Raitt, Cake, De La Soul, and Tracy Chapman, and gave free booth space to 52 equally diverse nonprofits from Media Alliance to the Leonard Peltier Defense Committee. The show drew all its power from biodiesel generators operating entirely off the grid, and Circle of Life worked closely with vendors to ensure that everything handed out on the day was either compostable or recyclable on-site. The festival and subsequent biodiesel bus tour were so successful in demonstrating how to stage an ecologically responsible outdoor event that Circle of Life planned a second fest to demonstrate that an indoor event could be equally sustainable. Saturday's festival at Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center is the result, featuring the Coup; the Roots; Michelle Shocked and the Waybacks; Third Eye Blind; and Mickey Hart, Joan Baez and Friends. The afternoon will be filled with workshops at Laney College about independent media; music, arts, and activism; building social movements; and direct action and civil disobedience.

Hill excels at inspiring people to take personal action on the issues they believe in. For that reason, throughout the election season she looked forward to November 3, when people could stop worrying about whom to elect to solve their problems and get back to fixing things themselves. "No matter who ends up in office, we have a lot of work to do," she said. "There's a little part of me that goes, 'A vote for George Bush would be a vote for the revolution,' and that's a piece of me that's really frustrated by people who voted Democratic because at least it's not Republican, and we end up with spineless Democrats who sell us out too, they just sell us out slower."

Her success in getting just plain folks to pick up the balls that elected officials often seem to drop has less to do with how she presents herself than how she presents the issues -- not just as earth-shatteringly

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

important, but also as solvable. She gives people hope, and a reminder that they themselves can make a difference, too, not just collectively but individually. What she does so powerfully and articulately is accentuate the positive.

"A big part of what I stand for is being part of a movement that I call 'revolutionary,' which means being focused on solutions," Hill told the animal-rights gathering. "I feel like we've gotten so good at defining what we're against that what we're against is beginning to define us. So I'm here to try on the idea of what an animal-rights movement would look like from a position of building what we are for, not just taking down what we're against."

Her comments prompted one young man in the audience to interject, "I just want to thank you for saying that. It's the first time I've heard anyone talk about making the world better instead of talking about how bad the problem is."

This reaction is exactly what Hill strives for. She describes her work as equal parts information, inspiration, and connection. Without information, people don't know what needs changing. Without inspiration, they don't see how it can be changed. And without connection to an organization, campaign, or channel for their energy, nothing actually gets done. "When people come up to me and say, 'Thank you for inspiring me,'" she said, "I always respond, 'Inspiration is so important. I'm so glad. What are you inspired to do?'"

If Hill is quick to point out that we all have our own trees to climb, metaphorically speaking, it's partly because she is the first to admit that clambering up a redwood is a strange qualification for leadership. "People don't really think about it, but you don't climb trees expecting to become well known," she said. "I climbed trees as a little girl because that's where I went to get away and to figure things out for myself. So when I found out that was something I could do as an activist, I resonated with that. I didn't know how to be an activist, but I knew how to climb trees."

But once Hill assumed her high-altitude, high-profile platform, she realized that she had little choice but to become a media spokeswoman -- and quickly. "I could try all I wanted, but they weren't going to talk to other people," she said. "I was the human interest hook." So she crammed as best she could up there, reading all she could get her hands on about environmental issues and Pacific Lumber Company's rampant clear-cutting after its hostile takeover by Charles Hurwitz Maxxam Corporation. Soon, she

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

was conducting interviews on a cell phone, and even serving as a remote guest speaker in classes and symposia.

Climbing that tree was Hill's first act as an activist. She grew up poor in Arkansas, living in a trailer with her parents and two brothers as her father, an itinerant preacher, kept them moving from town to town. She majored in business during college -- she relishes the dumbfounded look on people's faces when she tells them that -- then started a restaurant when she was eighteen, sold it after a couple of years, and became a consultant for restaurants and bars, making a great deal of money. But in August 1996, her Honda hatchback was rear-ended by a Ford Bronco, slamming her head into the steering wheel and resulting in some brain damage and temporary loss of motor skills. More than that, it made her stop and take stock of what exactly she was accomplishing with her life. With the funds from her insurance settlement, she decided to go wandering, and found her path on a chance stop in a Humboldt County redwood forest.

Earth First! volunteers had set up a rotating tree-sit several weeks earlier in a tree the group had dubbed Luna. Hill had simply shown up at a base camp one day, bursting with energy to save the redwoods, and eagerly volunteered when the group needed someone up in the tree for about a week. One thing led to another, and when she climbed back up for a three-week-long tree-sit, she wound up staying there for 738 days, far outstripping the previous 43-day world record.

Hill founded Circle of Life while she was in the tree. People asked what they could do to help, and she couldn't find an organization that could refer them to ecologically sustainable businesses or groups working on the issues they were passionate about.

"All this attention and energy was coming at me, and I wanted to make sure and direct it back out into the world," she said. "When the energy just comes to me and stops, it's just the Julia Butterfly Show, and I am really not into the Julia Butterfly Show. It doesn't serve anyone or anything. People were responding from all walks of life; it just seemed like a perfect opportunity to create an entity that could help direct the energy back out into all the good work going on in the world already."

Even so, Circle of Life still centered on the woman in the tree. But once Pacific Lumber promised not to cut down Luna or any other trees within a 250-foot buffer zone and Hill finally came down, the group's mission

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

expanded and Hill decided that this change required a move from Humboldt County to Oakland. "Even when I was in the tree, I felt that the tree issue was part of a much larger issue," she said. "From deforestation to nuclear proliferation to war to the prison-industrial complex, all these issues are symptoms of a disease I call a disconnected consciousness. When you're disconnected from the Earth, you can destroy it; when you're disconnected from another person, you can destroy them. I wanted to be a part of holistic healing that not only works on the symptoms but also works on what happened in our minds to get us so disconnected. So I knew that I had to get out of the remote area and get into a more urban city center to be able to do that kind of larger work."

The move meant a whole new team, as well as new offices and much greater expense. Circle of Life moved from the fiscal sponsorship of Humboldt's Trees Foundation to the late David Brower's larger Earth Island Institute. Alissa Hauser, who had been executive director of the San Francisco nonprofit Resourceful Women, was hired as executive director, and largely through her efforts Circle of Life became an independent nonprofit two years ago.

Circle of Life has since grown to be a lot more than just Julia Butterfly Hill, Inc. "When I started three years ago, most of our donors, supporters, and people on our mailing list, they were here for Julia, period," said Hauser, a friendly brunette with a warm smile. "But we've actively been expanding the organization, Julia included, to really get people involved in the world. We the Planet is a program that a lot of people don't even associate with Julia. She's involved, but they don't necessarily make the connection that it's a Julia thing."

Hidden away in a house marked only by a butterfly symbol in the window on a quiet North Oakland side street, Circle of Life's office is small but inviting, with more than enough space for its staff of six. Protector of the Woods, a Leonard Peltier print of a black-painted warrior crowned with large feathers peering out from behind the trunk of a white tree, which was presented to Hill by members of the American Indian Movement while she was still in the tree, hangs in the living room turned front office. Below it sits a bookcase filled with copies of her two books: her 2001 memoir of the tree-sit, *The Legacy of Luna* (in several languages), and *One Makes the Difference*, her 2002 how-to guide toward a healthy planet. On another wall hangs a quilt with panels depicting redwoods, butterflies, and peace signs. It was awarded to her in 2000 by the Boise Peace Quilt Project, a group of quilters

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

in Idaho who pick a different person to honor every year (past honorees include Rosa Parks, César Chávez, Pete Seeger, Dr. Helen Caldicott, Habitat for Humanity, and Mr. Rogers). Next to the door of the office Hill shares with Hauser is a collection of tacky postcards sent by staffers when they're on the road. In the kitchen sits a stack of letters from schoolchildren to Hill.

Although the staffers were all on the phone or working quietly on their computers during one recent Tuesday afternoon, the place retains a homey vibe, partly because each room still feels more like a living room or bedroom than an office. Sitting in the peaceful backyard lined with trees, potted plants, and bicycles, Hill said that coziness is all part of the plan: "One of my commitments was to make sure that I helped find a place that would nurture and sustain the team, because so often people involved in the sustainability movement are not sustainable in their work or in their lives," she said. "And I didn't want to be part of that."

The group was working so hard because of this Saturday's We the Planet Festival, its pride and joy. This year's fest, cohosted by Hill and Aya de León, hopes to replicate last year's success, this time as an indoor event in a building with no recycling program. It's a challenge they tackle eagerly, because the whole point is to demonstrate that it can be done. "After we did last year, the park people got really excited and said, 'This is great, we'll do this whenever we're in parks!'" Hill said. "But then there are all these other events that happen all the time that never happen in the park."

Once again this year, the stage, sound, and vendor booths will run from biodiesel generators, and the few things that can't be reconfigured to operate off the power grid -- for instance, the building's lighting -- will be offset by donations to Native American wind farms to produce an equivalent amount of clean energy. There will even be a bicycle-powered smoothie bar. Concertgoers are encouraged to bring their own containers and utensils. Nothing will be handed out that can't be composted or recycled, both of which will happen on-site.

Circle of Life works closely with vendors to ensure that all their practices comply with the event's exacting standards. "Last year was amazing," Hill said. "We'd hear vendors saying, 'Wow, we never thought about this,' and contacting us afterward saying, 'By the way, this is all we do now.'" Organizers also coach the nonprofits on ways to reduce the number of paper handouts and give event producers, nonprofits, and corporations

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

guidance on how they too can create green events. "Our goal is for groups all over the country and all over the world to copy us," Hauser said.

Slowly but surely, that's what's happening. Lollapalooza founder Perry Farrell attended We the Planet last year and was inspired to use biodiesel to power the stages for his 2003 tour -- at the second stage in all locations, and all generators at some stops, including Indianapolis and Denver. The Warped Tour enlisted We the Planet sponsor Earthware Biodegradables to provide biodegradable utensils for tour catering, and parts of the We the Planet model also were adopted by the Health and Harmony Festival in Santa Rosa and A La Carte, A La Park in San Francisco.

Hill often asks: "Why is everything that's good for our bodies, our communities, our world, and our planet called the 'alternative'? That means everything bad for us is the accepted norm." She has had to learn the language of marketing and branding to get these alternatives into the mainstream. "As a movement, we have not done a very good job of speaking that language," she said. "We say things like 'sustainability' and 'prison-industrial complex' and what I call the alphabet soup of the movement, all the numbers and letters, and people experience us like the teacher on Charlie Brown: 'Wah wah, wah wah, wah wah.' They see our lips moving and they have no idea what we're talking about. And then we get upset with them for not agreeing with us."

Thus the pithy slogans of We the Planet: "Sustainability is sexy. Consciousness is cool." That also accounts for the liberal use of celebrities to help draw in a crowd for last year's festival and tour, from Alice Walker to Alicia Silverstone, Woody Harrelson to the musician Flea.

Branding also is a key component of the Activism Is Patriotism campaign launched by Circle of Life this summer with a series of snappy video public service announcements featuring Hill rousing the faithful over the funky strains of Macy Gray, and full-page ads in Rolling Stone, Newsweek, Organic Style, and Business Week. The last was selected precisely to stir things up: "Business Week we chose because the business world is a huge part of the problem and also could be a huge part of the solution," Hill said.

The idea that corporations' relationship to the environment could be something other than adversarial is not all that far-fetched, Hill said. She is fond of reminding people that "every dollar is a vote," and where you spend that dollar, and what kind of products and policies you support with it, says

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

a lot about the kind of world you want to see. It isn't just a matter of not using unrecycled paper or petroleum products that are going to be produced anyway.

"The first thing people have to recognize about corporations is they have a charter that mandates that they make a profit for their shareholders," she said at the Natural World Museum's sustainability symposium last month. "Every corporation that's been the target of a major consumer campaign has shifted policies, because they're liable to their shareholders and will start losing profits if people start saying they need to change. They actually have to change in order to keep their corporate mandate to make a profit for their shareholders."

Thus, the Activism Is Patriotism ads that remind citizens to "Use your mind, your money, your voice, and your vote. Even the smallest action changes your country and your world." They direct people to the campaign's Web site, ActivismIsPatriotism.org, which offers links to a variety of nonprofit partners that can help people get started working for positive change.

"A lot of our work is taking perceived radical notions and getting them into the mainstream," Hill said. "The tree-sit made it into Good Housekeeping magazine, and you can't make it more mainstream than that. One of the most incredible comments I get is how young activists all of a sudden gained legitimacy in their families' eyes and in their communities' eyes. All of a sudden direct action and activism wasn't as radical and scary as people had been taught to think that it is. Every right that we take for granted in this country came from activism."

Hill knows firsthand the power one person can have to promote change in an industry. HarperSanFrancisco published *The Legacy of Luna* wholly on Hill's condition that it be printed on 100 percent postconsumer recycled paper with soy-based ink. She was a founding member of the Green Press Initiative, a group of authors who have demanded that their books be printed in the same manner, who include Margaret Atwood, Fritjof Capra, Paul Hawken, Barbara Kingsolver, Winona LaDuke, Alice Walker, and Andrew Weil. As a result of the group's efforts, more than fifty small to midsize publishing houses have agreed to maximize their use of postconsumer recycled paper within three to five years, including locals such as Ten Speed Press and the University of California Press.

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

More recently, *The Legacy of Luna* has been acquired for a movie adaptation by Baldwin Entertainment Group, the company behind the current Ray Charles biopic *Ray*, and will be adapted for the screen by David Ward, who wrote *The Sting* and *Major League*, and co-wrote *Sleepless in Seattle* and *The Milagro Beanfield War*. Hauser noted, "I can't tell you how many studios approached her to get to do the tree-sit story," which also was the subject of Doug Wolens' 2000 documentary *Butterfly*. But Hill would agree only if the movie was done her way, and her contract stipulates that it be filmed on a green, eco-friendly set. "She wanted to make sure the movie was done in a way consistent with her integrity and values, which included a movie set that wasn't throwing away a lot of disposables," Hauser said. "When they film in the forest, they have to hire a forestry expert to come on the shoot to make sure they have as little impact as possible."

For his part, Baldwin company head Howard Baldwin sounded very much like a convert in his press statement, which is scarcely surprising because the nature of the deal makes for great publicity. "We want to show that an ecology-minded production is doable," he said. "We hope it will start a trend in the film industry by encouraging others to follow suit."

If that sounds a lot like Circle of Life's rhetoric, Hauser couldn't be happier. "You know that saying, 'You have to throw the stone to get the pool to ripple?'" she asks. "We're like the stone. We show people what to do, and the ripples just go out and out and out and change the way our entire country is doing things."

For every big stone tossed in that pool, Circle of Life's day-to-day work is to drop a whole lot of pebbles. That's the job of its Action Support Center, which fields more than four hundred queries a month from people inspired by Hill's book, public speeches, or campaigns such as *Activism Is Patriotism*. "A lot of the questions that we get have come to us over and over again," said action support coordinator Aaron Lehmer, an energetic blond guy with a strong handshake and infectious energy. "'How can I save a tree in my community? How can I find nontoxic alternatives to pest control in my home?' So we have a whole suite of materials that address a lot of the constant questions that we get."

Circle of Life also provides some of its own tools for change, such as the "sustainability kits" (utensils, hemp napkins, stainless steel commuter mugs) it sells to get people less reliant on disposables. And with a team of

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

ten teachers, Circle of Life compiled a companion curriculum to The Legacy of Luna for grades K through 12 on subjects ranging from social studies to earth sciences, which it distributes free to teachers who request it. "We've got nearly four hundred teachers across the country using this already in their classrooms," Lehmer said. "We send it out readily after a couple of informational queries about what they're doing."

Hill's group does all this on an estimated 2004 operating budget of \$520,000. Eighty percent goes into its programs, with the remaining 20 percent going toward administration and fund-raising. Some of the group's revenue comes from the honorariums Hill receives for the small fraction of her speaking engagements for which she is paid. Other money comes from foundation grants, ticket or merchandise sales, and royalties from The Legacy of Luna, all of which Hill pledged to Circle of Life. But the majority comes from individual donations. Last year, for instance, the Red Hot Chili Peppers chipped in a surprise gift of \$30,000. Still, for the handful of large donors on which the nonprofit relies, there are many, many more tiny ones.

"We get kids sometimes saving their allowance to give to us," Hauser said. "The ones that humble me are -- we get \$1.35 cashier's checks from people in prison who are getting our newsletter and it brings some hope into their world," Hill said. "We have people who send \$5, \$10 donations because somehow we've helped them, and they want to make sure that other people have that opportunity, too."

Another person whom Hill motivated in an unexpected way was Ina Pockrass, then a high-powered San Francisco attorney. Pockrass met Hill when she represented the activist in a lawsuit about an advertisement that Hill believed had used her likeness unfairly. After the suit was settled, Pockrass herself became much less settled in her own career. "I was at a place where I really wanted to make a shift, have my work life be more of a reflection of my internal life," she said. "And I was really inspired by what Julia represented, which I think was best said by Mahatma Gandhi: 'Be the change you want to see in the world.'"

For Pockrass, that change involved a shift of careers to found an eco-friendly dental practice with her husband, Fred Pockrass. But Transcendentist, which opened in March 2003 across the street from the Claremont Hotel, wasn't created to be the first green dental office, she said -- that part just happened.

Interview

Julia Butterfly Hill

"We wanted to create a model where the consciousness of the environment and the human beings we were serving came first," she said. For the couple, that meant the creation of a sort of dental spa in which patients walk in to find New Age music and candles, Buddha statues behind the reception desk, and Balinese cradle-protecting statues of winged women over the dental chairs. Patients are offered tea, invited to take off their shoes and put on slippers made from recycled plastic bottles, and given foot massages in the dentist's chair.

In creating that environment, the Pockrasses chose recycled or biodegradable materials wherever possible, furnishing the office with all-natural, undyed wool carpet; wallpaper made from paper pulp and reclaimed bark; and furniture made from reclaimed wood. They use digital imaging instead of X-rays, steam-based sterilization, cotton bibs instead of paper, complimentary toothbrushes made of recycled yogurt cups, and a filtering system to avoid washing old mercury fillings into the water supply. "There wasn't a template for what we were doing," said Ina, who now serves on the Circle of Life board of directors. "And after we created this whole place, we found out that we had made these innovations in the environmental provision of dental services that had never been done by anybody." The Pockrasses were approached by the Green Business Program to go through their certification process, and discovered that they were literally the very model of modern eco-dentistry.