



WEB PAGE: <http://www.grist.org/article/hill1/>

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Julia Butterfly Hill, activist and onetime tree-sitter, answers questions

What work do you do?

I founded [Circle of Life](#) in 1999 while living in the branches of an over-1,000-year-old redwood to keep it from being cut down by MAXXAM-owned Pacific Lumber Company.

What does your organization do?

Circle of Life activates people through education, inspiration, and connection to live in a way that honors the diversity and interdependence of all life. We believe that you -- yes, you -- make the difference in the world.

What do you *really* do, on a day-to-day basis? What are you working on at the moment?

My days are filled with answering requests like this one from *Grist*. I also facilitate workshops, speak at events, fund-raise for many organizations (including Circle of Life, which also needs funds to do the work we do), strategize with team members around programs and ideas, write forewords and endorsements for books for authors who publish in ecologically sound

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ways, make art that is auctioned for nonprofits, and have meetings with key movement leaders.

What long and winding road led you to your current position?

It actually *was* a road that led me to where I am now. Literally. I had a car wreck in August of 1996 when I was designated driver, driving my friend's car (she had been drinking), and we were hit from behind by a drunk driver. It took 10 months of physical and cognitive therapy to recover from the wreck, and during that time I realized I wanted to find a more powerful purpose for being here on this planet. After I was released from my last doctor, I went on a road trip with friends which led me to California, which led me to the redwoods, which led me to found Circle of Life, which led *Grist* to be able to have a way to contact me, which led to this moment of me answering these questions.

How many emails are currently in your inbox?

I do not use email -- it takes all I have to just keep up with my life.

Where were you born? Where do you live now?

I was born in Mount Vernon, Mo. I now am based in Oakland, Calif., and have been for the last four years.

Who is your environmental hero?

I have so many people I look to for inspiration and motivation including Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Amílcar Cabral, and Joan Baez. I am inspired continuously by all kinds of people, young and old, of all kinds of cultural and economic backgrounds, who are contributing to making our world a better place.

What are you reading these days?

[*Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*](#); [*Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance*](#) by Leonard Peltier; [*The Lorax*](#); [*Horton Hears a Who*](#); everything [Rumi](#) -- just to name a few. I love to read.

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What's your favorite meal?

Just about anything vegan! I am a joyous vegan, and an avid cook and un-cook. I love preparing food that is healthy for people, the planet, and animals, and tastes damn good.

What's your favorite place or ecosystem?

Of course, the redwood forests are some of the most beautiful and sacred to me. I also have a strong love for any place that is tropical with ocean and fruit trees. I love being on the beach in the middle of nowhere, baking in the sun and listening to the hypnotic ocean.

What's one thing the environmental movement is doing badly, and how could it be done better?

We are doing a sad job at un-learning and undoing racism and classism and sexism within ourselves, our organizations, and our movement. Also, as a whole, we are pretty profoundly lacking in integrity. We need to spend less time preaching and more time practicing.

If you could institute by fiat one environmental reform, what would it be?

We could learn a heck of a lot from many European countries, including [making manufacturers responsible](#) for the life of the products they make, taxing manufacturers and consumers on everything that falls under the term "disposable," and holding manufacturers responsible for paying for the end result of all their packaging.

Who was your favorite musical artist when you were 18? How about now?

My music tastes are actually still pretty much what they were when I was 18 only I have added more world music and conscious hip-hop like [The Coup](#) to my repertoire. I am very eclectic. Some of my favorite bands then and now include [Sinead O'Connor](#), [Tori Amos](#), [Tool](#), [Nine Inch Nails](#),

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[Metallica](#), [Sarah McLachlan](#), [Bach](#), [Beethoven](#), [Mozart](#), and [Tupac Amaru Shakur](#) (2Pac), to name a few.

What's your favorite TV show? Movie?

TV kills your mind and your creativity.

Like my music tastes, my movie tastes are all over the place. My old-school all-time favorites are [The Princess Bride](#), [The Secret of NIMH](#), and [The Usual Suspects](#). More recent favorites include the [Lord of the Rings trilogy](#) and [Whale Rider](#).

What are you happy about right now?

This breath. And this one. And this one ... It is magic every time.

If you could have every InterActivist reader do one thing, what would it be? Get rid of disposability consciousness -- every paper bag, paper plate, paper napkin, plastic to-go container, and Styrofoam cup. I have walked on the earth that is connected to the thread at the other end of those horrific choices, and I am not being overdramatic when I say disposables are *weapons of mass destruction*.

And, if you are inspired by the message and work of [Circle of Life](#), please donate whatever you can.

Madame Butterfly

How do you feel about your experiences surrounding Luna being turned into a film? What is your involvement with the project? --

Chris Schults, Seattle, Wash.

Over the last seven years, various individuals, producers, and studios have approached me, wanting to turn my story into a film. Even when there were financially lucrative opportunities at the table, I ended up walking away from all previous offers because there was a lack of integrity somewhere in the process. I feel truly blessed to be working with Participant Productions and Baldwin Entertainment on [this project](#). I am working with people who have such a commitment to making our world a better place, and one of the areas they feel is a powerful place to do this is in the media and film industry. And they are highly accomplished and talented in their respective fields. Furthermore, this is going to be the first committed green set in Hollywood, and we are already implementing this in areas like offsetting carbon emissions for travel with wind credits purchased through [Native](#)

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[Energy](#), a majority Native-owned wind-energy company. I feel this film is an incredible opportunity to get my message out in a really powerful way.

When you ascended Luna you didn't set out to become a celebrity, but now that you've attained that status, what do you think about its effects on your life and activism? Do you find that you (however reluctantly) embrace your status due to some of its obvious advantages, or is your notoriety something you wish you could turn off despite its usefulness? -- Todd Hymas, Olympia, Wash.

On a personal level, I have always struggled with the attention focused on me. My ongoing commitment, though, has been to do everything in my power to use this attention as a catalyst and opportunity for others to step into their courage, power, divinity, passion, and purpose. I want to see a world full of people finding their own version of their "tree," committing to living their lives for something bigger than themselves, and creating lives of meaning, joy, and connection.

I know a couple of years ago you were refusing to pay income taxes in protest of the ongoing Iraq war. How did this turn out? -- Bill Prescott, Knoxville, Tenn.

I remain a war-tax resister. I choose to live below the poverty level so that the government cannot use money I generate to perpetuate war against the planet and its people. For information on what it means to be a war-tax resister, its history, and the various ways to be a conscientious objector around taxes check out the [National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee](#) and our [Activism Is Patriotism](#) campaign for the many ways to use your mind, money, voice, and vote to make a difference.

How important is spirituality to your life and work? -- Adrian Harris, London, U.K.

Spirituality is not just a *part* of my life; it *is* my life. My religion is love and integrity. My life is my spiritual practice where I put love and integrity into *action*. A deep sense of the Sacred is my moral compass that guides my thoughts, words, and actions.

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I've been a big fan for years, but wonder if you have found yourself appealing to, or connecting with, more "mainstream" folks? --

Anna Swanson, Missoula, Mont.

A lot of my work and the work of my nonprofit [Circle of Life](#) has been about creating powerful, fun, creative, and meaningful [events](#) and opportunities that reach into the mainstream and create a space for anyone, anywhere, at any stage in their life, to find steps toward contributing to our world and making a difference. At just about every event I have ever done, there are people who come just because they heard about me in the media and are curious. I love having the opportunity to interact with them and prove that we are all much more diverse and wonderful than stereotypes allow. Activism is not about stereotypes, labels, or cliques. It is about caring about your world and choosing to do *something* to contribute and make a difference.

Your message is overwhelmingly positive and focuses on inspiring people. However, as an ecologically sensitive being, you must experience pain often when you witness degradation in its myriad forms. How do you deal with sadness, anger, and hopelessness? --

Renee Lertzman, Cardiff, U.K.

In my commitment to be powerfully connected, I am connected both to the inspiring beauty, wonder, and magic, and to the deep grief and sadness. There is very rarely a day that goes by that I don't cry. As I write this, my mind and heart reflect on our [prisons](#) overflowing with lives we are throwing away, the ancient grove of Nanning Creek in Humboldt, Calif., that has recently been devastated, the last [wild buffalo](#) who face slaughter every time they leave the safety of Yellowstone, the starving and dying in Africa and India, the [toxic "recycling" dumps](#) in China, the bombed-out homes and lives in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan, and the continuous cultural genocide of Native people in the U.S. And as I reflect, the tears are sliding down my cheeks.

I have found that my power is in my care and commitment, my joy comes from being in service, my passion comes from every breath reminding me how absolutely magical and divine life is. It is really a dance of balance -- how to remain powerfully connected and at the exact same time be unattached. Sounds funny or weird, but it is the lesson I learned so intensely while living in Luna, going through the worst storms in recorded history, witnessing the destruction of forests all around me, and having all

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kinds of opinions and beliefs thrust on me from every direction. Whatever I feel, I am powerfully related to it, but I let it flow through me. This includes the beautiful and joyful things. If I am attached to these, then I lose my power every time I feel sad or angry. Like a tree, I remain deeply rooted and connected to my source, but I flow with the storms of life.

Finally, I realize that I am the creator of my feelings. We act as if life and what happens in it is responsible for our feelings, but the truth is life happens and then what we do with that is our responsibility. I do not adhere to the belief that everything happens for a reason. I recognize that everything happens, and the reason is what we make of it. With a commitment to being the divinity within me, even though I do not always succeed, I choose love, joy, peace, and integrity in the face of destruction, loss, violence, grief, and frustration.

I see you are serious about saving the California redwoods from the timber industry. Because America's population is exploding, there is demand for more wood. How are we supposed to satisfy our demand for timber without cutting down more forests? What actions are you taking to stop growth and development? -- Daniel Barker, Lakeland, Fla.

We live in a disposable society. Especially in the U.S., we have one of the smallest populations with the largest and most voracious consumption appetite. We build in obsolescence; we emphasize cheap and fast instead of quality, integrity, and sustainability. We need to really hold ourselves accountable to the choices we make. The more privilege we have, the more responsibility we have. Personally, I have chosen to have surgery to insure that I never procreate. I feel we have not earned the right to give birth to children, because we are not doing a good enough job taking care of the children who are already here or the planet into which they are birthed. I tell people that if they feel they absolutely have to give birth, then choose to only give birth to one child and extend their love beyond their own self-interests and include the planet and the children who are already here. I look forward to the day I hear men having enough commitment, courage, and power to take elective surgery to insure they are an active part in reducing human demands on the planet and nurturing the divine beings who are already here.

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What advice would you give to parents today on talking to their children about environmental problems? -- Tim Forker, Brooklyn, N.Y.

The best teacher is leading by example. Hold yourself more accountable than you hold them on *every* level. Also, make it fun, interesting, creative, and engaging, and really create the space for them to do some deep questioning of themselves and even you, and show respect for their process. The more we value young people's wisdom, thoughts, ideas, and feelings, the more they will value ours. Create time and opportunities for them to be in service to their community -- human, animals, and nature. We have a nation of predominantly spoiled and ignorant children -- even the poorest among us are some of the richest in the world. It is really powerful for young people to see what life is like for others who do not have as much access to privilege. Finally, go to the [education section](#) of our website -- there you will find the [Kid's Zone](#) and [Solutions You Can Use](#).

How has the realization of the threat of global warming affected you and your activities as a touring activist and speaker? What do you do -- and what would you suggest others do -- about your impact? -- Kaleb Hopper, Albuquerque, N.M.

My office, tours, events, and life are carbon-neutral. Here are some of the ways we accomplish that: light bulbs are energy efficient; heating and cooling are kept to a minimum with an emphasis on adding or subtracting layers of clothing; tours are done with a bus that runs on recycled vegetable oil; all new appliances purchased meet the highest energy-efficiency standards; we use 100 percent recycled paper and reuse scrap paper from other offices for our in-house printing needs (a whole lot of energy consumption happens in the manufacturing and distribution of goods); we have a vegetarian -- predominantly vegan -- office (eating animals for food in industrialized nations is a huge energy consumer as well as a forest destroyer, and forests help store carbon); many of us (myself included) are car-free in our daily lives, choosing instead to bike, walk, skateboard, and use public transportation; and, finally, after focusing on reducing our energy consumption, we partner with [Native Energy](#) to offset all our carbon emissions.

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Where do you see the planet in 50 years, both if the world follows the destructive path it's on and if more people start being more environmentally conscious? -- Mike Scott, Madison, Wis.

The future lives in the here and now through who we are being, the choices we make, and the stands and risks we are willing to embrace. We live our lives backward, saying that some day, if things are a certain way in our lives, then we can be what we want and create what we want. The truth is that who we are co-creates the world we are a part of. You want to know what the future will look like? Look in your life and see where your life and actions are in integrity, love, justice, peace, and commitment, and where they are not -- that is what the future looks like. Our greatest power in having a future that inspires us lies in living inspiring, connected, and committed lives now.

I have seen those in the NGO world grasp their campaigns with such fervor that they become hostile to anyone who does not agree with their thinking. This leads to an overly simplistic "us vs. them" mentality. Decisions then get made at an emotional level instead of at a rational level, and constructive discussion turns into finger-pointing. How do you avoid this? -- Jeffrey Clair, Chiang Rai, Thailand

There is no "us vs. them." That is part of how all of us have inherited the disease of disconnected consciousness. We are connected to everything that ever has been, everything that is, and everything that ever will be -- positive and negative. And this is true whether you look through a spiritual, philosophical, or scientific lens. Ultimately my greatest and most authentic power lies in how I am *connected*, not in how I am disconnected. The more I look for ways to be connected to others, the more ways I find we are connected *and* the more success I have in campaigns.

I want to help with the environment as much as I can in my lifetime. What kind of trees could I plant in my yard to make this world a better place? I am nine and want to share this information with my class. -- Mitch Ashby, Antioch, Calif.

The best thing to do is find out what is native to your area and plant that! Loss of native habitat is one of the leading threats to the health of our planet and our lives. Often, native plants are considered "weeds" so they are pulled out and destroyed, but native plants are important to the health

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of the entire community of insects, animals, people, and even other processes like water usage. Also, look into planting edible plants and herbs. The more we can grow our own food, the more we are connected to our place and our health.

I admire the way you live your life -- no apologies, no excuses, no doubt. If the world were a perfect place, your picture would be on the walls of little girls everywhere. What was the most profound thing the redwood taught you? -- Amethyst Blade, Fort Worth, Texas

Living in Luna taught me so many profound things; I do not think I could just pick one. It taught me that love and integrity in *action* are the most powerful tools I have for making a difference and contributing to the world. It taught me to remain rooted and connected, but also to bend and flow and not be rigid, including in my beliefs. It taught me that a deep listening with *all* of my senses is my access to wisdom, guidance, and connection. It taught me that my greatest power is not in power *over*, but rather in power *with*. And it taught me that we manifest what we focus on; if we focus only on the problems, we will be sure to have more of them. If we focus on and live solutions, we will have a more healthy and vibrant world.

What is the difference that you see between TV and movies? It's the same medium; however, you said that TV kills your mind and your creativity, yet you have a list of favorite movies. -- Courtney Ranstrom, Salem, Ore.

The major difference is that with TV in a home, what I find to almost always be the case is that the TV begins to guide the person -- as in people spend *way* too much time staring at the screen instead of interacting and connecting with their families and community. If it is an *occasional* film or show, then it can actually be a tool that we use, but my experience has shown me that for 99.9 percent of people who have a TV, people become a tool of the TV instead of the other way around.

I know that you moved around a great deal as a child. How do you create a sense of place for yourself in the new areas you have moved to? -- Elizabeth Mather, Columbus, Ohio

I am a highly adaptable person. I tend to flow with what is around me, so I am usually pretty good at being able to feel connected to wherever I am for

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however long I am there. I do feel, though, that part of the challenge facing our human species is that many of us are now able to migrate faster and farther than we as a species can keep up with while remaining connected. We have no commitment to place. If we do not like it, we move. We do not see the consequences of our choices, and we have less and less commitment to seven generations ahead. As my commitment is to always remain connected, I have created some rituals that help me remain so even when traveling. I have objects that are sacred to me and related to people and places that I bring with me everywhere I go. I also take time to search out something to be connected to everywhere that I go; sometimes it is a tree, a lake, or sometimes it might be a local restaurant or food co-op.

I am passionate about accelerating the transition to a more sustainable society, and I am about to graduate from a dual-degree graduate program in business and natural resources. Can you offer your thoughts on how you see the role of business in the journey toward sustainability? -- Nathan Arbitman, Ann Arbor, Mich.

Economics and *ecologics* share the same root word, which means "house" or "home." *Economics* in its literal translation is "stewardship of one's place." Sadly, economics and capitalism are now talked about as if they are the same thing, but they are not. Clif Bar, Ecological Panel, [Interface Carpet](#), Native Energy, and [Patagonia](#) are some of my favorite leading companies who are doing well financially by doing good for the planet and all its life, including humans. All money is green energy -- it is a way we have of exchanging, investing, and valuing energy. With this being the case, business has the potential to do incredible good. What we need is to adjust our values so that economics are used to take care of our place instead of exploiting our place, which is the idea on which capitalism is based. I am excited to know that you are committed to using business as a tool to serve our world!