

Gimme Some Lovins: Hunter Lovins, thinker on sustainability, answers Grist's questions

My activism started in about 1963, working in such movements as fair housing and civil rights; I then moved on to anti-Vietnam War organizing, human rights work, and environmental protection. I quit being a member of Sierra Club in protest at the first firing of Dave Brower, and went with him to Friends of the Earth. In 1970, while taking double degrees in political studies and sociology, I planted a tree on the first Earth Day. The choice to go to law school was driven by the belief that this would make me a more effective advocate for social change (law turned out to be a lousy way of creating social change, but that's another story ...).

In 1973, the Arab oil embargo hit and suddenly energy was on everyone's mind. It wasn't until 1976 and Amory Lovins' piece in *Foreign Affairs* -- "Energy Strategy: The Road Not Taken?" -- that I found an internally consistent approach to solving the energy challenge. The trouble was that Amory, a physicist, wrote so technically that almost no one would take the time to try to understand him. I only did because a man I highly respected said that this was the approach for which I had been searching. But I had to go through the article with a ruler and a dictionary, line by line, figuring out just what he meant. I translated Amory's end-use/least cost analysis into English and started teaching it to the third graders and senior citizens to whom we were teaching environmental education. Stripped of the technical language, it made a lot of sense (and still does).

The chief economist of Atlantic Richfield thought what I had done was pretty neat, and introduced Amory and me -- I guess we have big oil to thank for that -- and in 1978 Amory and I integrated our careers.

We worked together for Dave Brower, as policy advisors to Friends of the Earth. FOE paid about enough to pay the phone bill. But we loved it. Dave had a gift for hiring young activists who needed little supervision and would work for almost nothing if they had the chance to change the world.

Amory and I traveled the world, getting married somewhere along the way. We based out of a rented room in London, but mostly out of a big brown suitcase named "House."

Then Dave got fired again around 1981. Dave had once more pissed off his board of directors for refusing to be reasonable. Russ Train had once pleaded with him, "Dave, be reasonable." Dave answered, "Reasonable people have never accomplished anything." He was also fond of saying, "If you have a positive bank balance you haven't realized the urgency of the situation." This refusal to be normal founded the modern environmental movement, but it drove boards of directors to distraction. Dave never was a good manager, just the best leader with whom I have ever worked.

We sided with Dave, so it was clear that we were going to be out of a job, too. This wasn't much of an economic loss, but it's nice to have a title. So one day, driving across the country to go teach at Dartmouth, Amory and I idly discussed what we were gonna be when we grew up. We both felt that the really interesting areas to explore were not in any one discipline. We were into the interconnections between such areas as energy policy and water, economic development, national security, environmental protection and social justice, and nuclear non-proliferation.

But there are only 36 hours in a day and only two of us. It seemed to me that if we were ever to get out of doing just energy policy, we needed some help. So somewhere in one of those big flat states, maybe Iowa or Ohio, I suggested to Amory that we bring together a small handful of colleagues for whom finding and understanding and acting on these interconnections was their life passion too, and create an institute.

Amory's answer was, "Oh horrors, administrivia!" I said that I would do the administering and he could focus on the quality of the research -- and Rocky Mountain Institute was born. We took a quarter of a class that we had taught at Dartmouth to Old Snowmass, Colo., to help us build the first passive-solar, super-insulated, semi-underground "bioshelter." Some of them stayed on to become staff. We figured we'd be about 12 people with a budget of a couple hundred thousand. When I was fired in 2002, RMI had a staff of 54 and a \$7.4 million budget -- and a board that prefers "reasonable people."

What has been the worst moment in your professional life to date?

When the chair of the board of RMI walked into my office with no warning and told me that I was terminated, effective immediately, leave the building and speak to no one, and I realized that Amory had gone into hiding and hadn't the guts to tell me that 30 years of a partnership had died.

Another was learning, after I went into the home that I built with my own hands, and still owned, to get some photos that had belonged to my mother, before leaving Old Snowmass for Boulder, that RMI had called the sheriff on me, trying to get me arrested for theft. Given that I had for the past 15 years been a member of the local fire department and had spent a whole lot of winter nights working wrecks in the canyon with the sheriff's boys, they just grinned and wished me a great drive to my new home. I crossed the continental divide laughing the whole way. And I guess RMI is still mad about it. But it's really not that funny

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What's been the best?

Waking up every day to the opportunity to give it one more go. There's a great cartoon of a ball field scoreboard that has the realists against the idealists. The score runs realists one, idealists zero until the bottom of the 9th, when it reads realists zero, idealists one.

There are lots of great moments: walking into a high-school cafeteria way up at the end of the road on the Big Island of Hawaii to try to talk the public utility commission into not letting the utility build a diesel power plant in the last part of the island that had clean air, and having a packed room of local people rise to their feet when they saw my cowboy hat. It must have affected the PUC -- they cancelled the plant a few weeks later.

Who is your environmental hero?

No way, I could not name only one: Of course Dave Brower, and Dana Meadows -- the two greatest environmental writers of our age. And Dave Orr, Paul Hawken, Bill McKibben, Dennis Meadows, Denis Hayes, and Janine Benyus.

Once in college, someone asked me who my hero was. I thought a moment and said, "Me. No one else is responsible -- I am. So it's got to be me." Hemingway once said that everything is your fault if you're any damn good. And for a week or so all the other students said, "Well then you are our hero, too." They got over it. But I didn't. I still feel that I am responsible to do all that I can.

Would you label yourself an *environmentalist*?

Dave Brower said, "I'm an environmentalist -- everyone who lives in an environment ought to be one." That is still the best reason I've heard.

What important environmental issue is frequently overlooked?

Social justice. Dave Brower was fond of quoting Adlai Stevenson, who said in 1965:

We travel together, passengers on a little space ship, dependent upon its vulnerable reserves of air and soil, all committed for our safety to its security and place, preserved from annihilation only by the care, the work and, I will say, the love we give our fragile craft.

We cannot maintain it half fortunate, half miserable, half confident, half despairing, half slave to the ancient enemies of humankind, and half free in a liberation of resources undreamed of until this day. No craft, no crew, can travel safely with such vast contradictions. On their resolution depends the security of us all.