

August 11: Medley Lakes to Evolution Valley

I wake up disoriented from a dream. When I get around to breakfast, I find the remaining bread is dotted with mold; the stove has trouble starting; I trip over a rock in the campsite — one of those days. I stop and look all around as the day's first light brushes the summit of Seven Gables and inches down the neighboring peaks and ridges to the tops of the pines. I get back into the daily rhythm of the wilderness.

A morning and evening routine of camp life has settled in. It is comforting in my solitude and also means the necessary chores get done correctly. The consequences of losing or forgetting anything out here could be severe. The contrast between the mundane routine and the emancipation of the wild is not lost on me.

In the morning after watching and photographing the sunrise and writing my thoughts, I fetch a pot of water, start the stove, make a cup of Tang, take a vitamin, get out an oatmeal package, Milkman instant dry milk, and coffee. The water is usually boiling when I finish the Tang. I put a spoonful or so of Milkman and water in the now empty cup and stir, add the oatmeal, time the boiling for three minutes to kill any giardia that may be in the water, pour the hot water over the oatmeal, eat it while watching the morning light on the near and far trees and rocks, put coffee in the cup, and fill the cup with hot water. Though the coffee has no nutritional value, it weighs almost nothing and I enjoy it. With the remaining hot water I shave; the results would disqualify me from a Gillette commercial, but I grow an uneven, annoying beard. While sipping the coffee I write and take in the surroundings for as long as I wish.

For dinner, I measure the water into the pot and add some home-dried vegetables. I start the stove. When the water boils, I put the main dish in the pot with the vegetables and let them cook for the necessary couple of minutes. I don't have the energy or desire to spend time preparing food. I'd rather look at the lake, creek, mountains, meadow, whitebark pines, and sky than whatever glop sits in an aluminum pot. The excitement at mealtime comes from the scenery.

The instant meals sold at grocery and health food stores, supplemented with home-dried vegetables are cheaper and taste better than designer backpacking food. Of course, expectations play a part. It's easier to swallow ramen noodles at 25 cents or chili at \$1.59 than turkey Tetrizzini at eight dollars. Once, after a week in the farthest reaches of the Yosemite high country, Barbara and I hiked fifteen miles with several thousand feet of elevation gain and loss, camping on Lewis Creek below Vogelsang Pass. Exhausted, we heated our "gourmet" meal of shrimp Creole saved for this final dinner. We spooned portions on our plastic plates, eagerly took our first bite, paused, looked at each other, and laughed. We didn't need to say the obvious of what it tasted like.

For all my belief in Thoreau's "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity," I travel in this wilderness thanks to the benefits of modern technology. The *CD* in the Orion *CD* tent's name stands for "computer design." I use a portable gas stove and a water filter. This modern equipment limits

my impact on the wilderness while also providing a level of ease and comfort unknown to Muir, LeConte, or even those who traveled the backcountry twenty-five years ago.

As with most contemporary culture, these “advancements” in outdoor gear come with more than ecological awareness and a higher price tag. What was once a cult business became mass market consumerism. Small companies providing a product or service for a particular audience became large corporations concerned with amassing wealth. One result of this change is that the industry’s marketing of equipment’s snob value, along with the relatively high cost, feed into the perception of wilderness lovers as elitists, a viewpoint bolstered by the attitude of many self-proclaimed environmentalists.

If one adopts a strictly human perspective, environmentalism can be considered elitist. By declaring a certain area of land off limits to vehicles (from jeeps to bicycles and even wheelchairs) and uses (mining, logging), certain people and groups are excluded, which is not a democratic notion.

From a larger perspective, those who treat nature from a human society perspective and thus as a resource to exploit or a recreation area for temporary amusement view our planet as existing solely for human use, their personal use. That is the most elitist of notions.

Wilderness is not a recreation area. Though I enjoy being here, the Sierra wilderness does not exist to entertain me.

I leave Medley Lakes and head cross-country to intersect the Muir Trail at Marie Lake. I don’t think I pick the best way to go; I’m more like Clarence King, who habitually chose the wrong route, than John Muir, who possessed a remarkable instinct for finding his way in an unmapped wilderness. I eventually reach the low ridge west of Marie Lake; the expanse of water spreads across the basin below Selden Pass. From the south side of the lake, I hike diagonally to the obvious trail. The final climb is the easiest of any “major” pass in the Sierra.



Marie Lake from Selden Pass

At the top, a group of Boy Scouts (as announced by their identical T-shirts) with their parent/chaperones are taking a break. The Scouts regard me with curiosity, but say nothing to my nods and “Hi.” The chaperones behave as I am an affront to their existence. Only one manages even a hello; he’s planted himself at the top of the pass on the trail; I walk past him, say “Good morning” and prompt a one-word response. I walk to what seems the best place, try the cell phone, and fail to get a signal. Feeling like an intruder, I take in the view and head down.

Below Selden Pass, the trail makes a long descent to the canyon of the South Fork of the San Joaquin. In contrast to the climb down from Bear Ridge, the views are often more expansive, the trail not so dusty or rocky, and the landscape moves through each ecological zone with less predictability of flora and fauna.

Hiking, I almost feel as if I am on automatic, moving at a quick walk, negotiating the variations in the trail without breaking rhythm. Each footstep is carefully chosen in a split-second decision, body and mind moving in response to the constantly changing surface of the land. Roots, rocks, up, down, left, right, a fluid rhythm of movement, eyes shifting between the distant views of the Goddard Divide and Evolution peaks, where thunderheads are forming, to the purple lupine, red penstemon, and white gentian growing by the trail. Long switchbacks meander down to the canyon of the South Fork of the San Joaquin. To the east stands the Sierra Crest, to the south the Goddard Divide and the Evolutions, while to the west the river disappears into the green forested hills and finally, out of sight, the San Joaquin Valley.

Swelled by the snowmelt of the High Sierra, the San Joaquin and other rivers feed the agricultural empire of California’s Central Valley; the abundance below grows from the water that begins flowing above. When one reads the awestruck tales of early European travelers, the impression is that in its natural state, many areas of America, especially California, resembled an earthly paradise. People found plentiful food for survival, ample material for shelter, and incomparable natural beauty. Yet we thought of this land as a wilderness to conquer.

“We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and winding streams with tangled growth, as ‘wild,}’ said Standing Bear of the Oglala. “Only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness’ and only to him was the land ‘infested’ with ‘wild’ animals and ‘savage’ people.”[42]

In California, that near-paradise perished for the sake of acquiring a precious metal and fueling the capitalist engine. While California’s native tribes manipulated nature (the Ahwnachee, for instance, annually burned the grass of Yosemite Valley), the European immigrants chose to radically alter the land itself. They changed the course of its waters, obliterated forests, reshaped the hills, and covered it in concrete. Chief Joseph said:

The earth was created by the assistance of the sun, and it should be left as it was . . . The country was made without lines of demarcation, and it is no man’s business to divide it. . . . I see the whites all over the country gaining wealth, and see their desire to give us lands which are worthless. . . . The earth and myself are of one mind. The measure of the land and the measure of our bodies are the same. . . . Do not misunderstand me, but understand me fully with reference to my affection for the land. I never said the land was mine to do with it as I chose.[43]

Thoreau was one of the few white American voices of his time who questioned Manifest Destiny. In his introduction to *The Maine Woods*, Edward Hoagland maintains, “The continent might scarcely have been settled if Thoreau’s priorities had held sway.”[44] Perhaps in the long run it might have been better if something closer to Thoreau’s priorities had prevailed. America’s rapid western expansion resulted in the near genocide of the native people, extinction of numerous species such as the passenger pigeon, and the destruction of many of the long-evolved ecological systems. Think of the nation the United States might now be if westward expansion had occurred more slowly, dominated by other motivations besides the accumulation of material wealth.

Land is still judged by how economically useful it is to humans. Even in the Sierra, Inyo, and other national forests, signs announce this is a “land of many uses.” This means that along with “recreation,” our public lands are used by private logging and mining companies and ranchers at bargain prices. A few years ago in the Ansel Adams Wilderness after three days of seeing no creatures except fish, chipmunks, pikas, flies, mosquitos, and each other, Barbara, Gordon, and I came upon a herd of cows grazing in a remote meadow, their “cow pies” covering the ground and residing in the small creek.

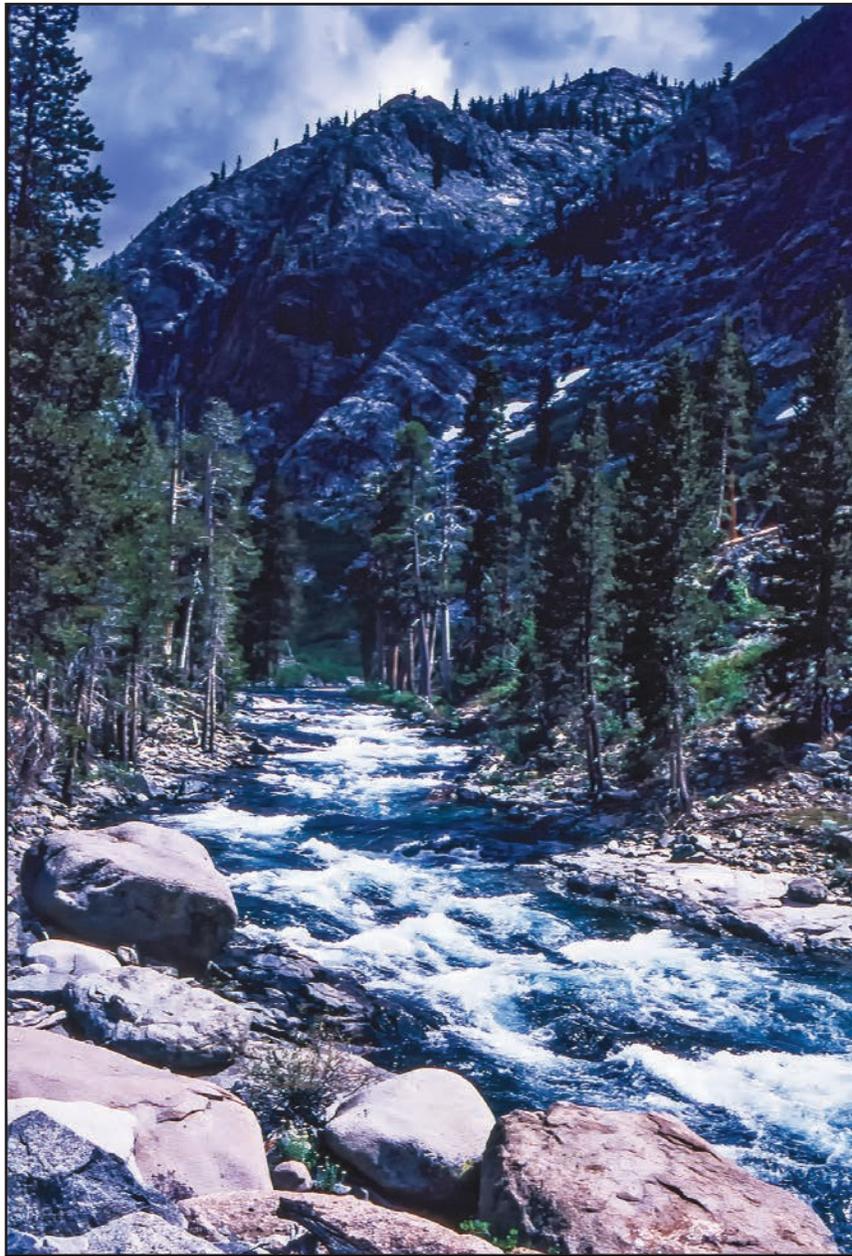
Woody Guthrie said this land is your land and my land; it belongs to all of us collectively and none of us individually. As long as the economic powers-that-be exploit our public lands for private gain, the rest of us are being robbed, not only of money, but of the ecological systems that sustain the land that produce the food we eat, the water we drink, and the raw materials that constitute the household objects of our daily lives. Not only are most human beings cheated, but also each and every life form inhabiting this planet.

As currently practiced, capitalism is primarily concerned not with fulfilling life’s necessities, but rather with accumulating human luxuries. All aspects of society, even our art and social activities, are encouraged and expected to keep the wheels of the economic engine turning at an ever faster pace. In the consumer economy, this means shuffling money around in circles. Money is a means of exchange, not a defining component of life. Economics mean nothing to any species except *Homo sapiens*.

Even for humans, intrinsic worth is not based on economic utilitarianism. If it were, we would be a world without songs, poems, paintings, dances, jokes, and all those other intangibles that produce nothing “useful.” When viewing human history from a long-term perspective, ask yourself how many can name any of the richest men of ancient Greece, Rome, and China. Yet we venerate Homer, Virgil, Confucius, and LaoTse. Van Gogh may have been a pauper, but can you name any businessmen living in nineteenth century France? With the exception of Mark Twain, America’s greatest works of literature published in John Muir’s lifetime were all commercial failures: *Walden*, *Moby Dick*, and *Leaves of Grass*; almost all of Emily Dickinson’s poems were unpublished until after her death. Muir said of E. H. Harriman, one of the wealthiest men of his time, “I don’t think Mr. Harriman is very rich. He has not as much money as I have. I have all I want and Mr. Harriman has not.”[45]

A chief of the northern Blackfeet, when asked to sign a land treaty, said, “Our land is more valuable than your money. It will last forever. It will not even perish by the flames of fire. As long as the sun shines and the waters flow, this land will be here to give to men and animals.”[46]

The living land maintains value beyond human activity. Land itself is worth not just preserving but existing as it is. Not as it was or might be. Is.

*South Fork, San Joaquin River*

In the canyon of the South Fork of the San Joaquin, the blue and white water tumbles between two thousand foot granite walls. The riverside trail passes through pine woods, rustling aspens, and fields of flowers. At one bend a long pine lies across the river, looking as if it were placed in that spot by a mountain giant. Billowing clouds congregate around the peaks, presaging a thunderstorm.

For over fifteen years I've dreamed of camping in Evolution Valley. I seek the view I've seen in photographs, with Mt. Darwin on the left, the Hermit on the right, and the awesome amphitheater of the Evolution Peaks in the background above a curving creek flowing through

a luminous meadow. After crossing the bridge over the South Fork, I eagerly tramp up the switchbacks; near the top, the cascades of Evolution Creek distract me from my fatigue. When the climbing concludes, the trail follows the creek through a lovely forest. I step from the trees into the wide-open green of Evolution Meadow and am greeted with a resounding thunderclap.

A family is fly-fishing by the crossing of Evolution Creek. As I wade across, I jokingly apologize for disturbing the fish. The father laughs and asks with a knowing smile, “Do you think it’s going to rain?” Black clouds hover overhead. A flash of lightning brightens the sky, another thunderclap reverberates, and the rain begins. Hiking up Evolution Valley, I meet many people walking down the trail. Despite the rain, each and every one smiles and laughs, radiating happiness. I don’t think I’ve ever been anywhere where everyone is so full of joy.

The rain stops. I continue hiking through the pines and the brighter expansiveness of meadow, awaiting *the* view. After a couple of short climbs, I glimpse the Hermit through a stand of pines. The valley opens up as Evolution Creek meanders through the life-affirming green of McClure Meadow. The water is quite high for August. The trail follows the edge of the meadow toward a large unoccupied campsite surrounded by tall pines. I step through the trees and the view appears before me. I pause in wonder before continuing my search for a tent site farther from the trail. A nearby rocky outcropping looks promising. The rain returns. I dash to the site, lean the pack against a tree, erect the tent in a personal record, toss the clothes, camera, and notebooks inside, and, of course, the rain stops. I cook dinner, my eyes on the scene before me.



McClure Meadow, Evolution Valley

Clouds move from Mt. Darwin across the valley to the Hermit, reminiscent of Yosemite Valley after a winter storm. The clouds and light constantly shift. I feel lucky, indeed blessed, to witness such a sunset. I see no one in either direction. I can't quite believe I am camped in this place with no other people in sight; there is not even the light of a distant campfire.

It is a great joy and spiritual necessity to sit in silent solitude, doing nothing except looking at the creek, the peaks, the trees, the flowers, feeling the breeze, hearing the water. This is of no known "use" or economic value. I am simply alive to both the voices of the wild and the voices in my heart and soul, discovering where they take me. This is a greater gift than all the wealth in the world. The memory of this time will bring peace of mind for a lifetime.

Standing beside Evolution Creek, the water dreamily flows by. I feel as if I float just above the shimmering meadow grass and the creek's serene current. The setting sun's light streams between the black and gray clouds; each rock, flower, blade of grass, and pine needle glows with a gold worth more than all the precious metals on the planet. I sense the Sierra speaking to me, but what is it truly saying?

In the wild, everywhere is living change. Even the mountains change. And somehow over the centuries the wild maintains its essential balance even as it evolves. We humans have disrupted that balance. Is it possible for us to try to learn to live with that symmetry? That does not mean returning to mud huts or caves. It means examining the way we live and comprehending how to coexist with all other life on our planet. When we view our existence from other perspectives besides those of economic determinism and religious dogma, then we see *Homo sapiens* as a single species among the multitude.

As I gaze west down Evolution Valley, a fiery sky gleams above the dark pines, the crimson light flickering in the ripples of the creek. As darkness descends, gray and black clouds surge overhead. In the tent, I slip into sleep to the sound of rain drifting down as darkness descends on Evolution Valley.



McClure Meadow, Evolution Valley