



Unicorn Peak, Cathedral Peak, Tuolumne River from Soda Springs, June 2007

August 3: Tuolumne Meadows to Rush Creek

Tuolumne Meadows. Here in the summer of 1889, John Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson sat before a campfire at Soda Springs. With “tears in his voice,” Muir lamented the destruction befalling his beloved Yosemite and “Range of Light.”[1] That night the two men conceived of preserving the High Sierra as a place to be set aside for future generations — a national park. To support their crusade, Johnson commissioned an essay for his *Century* magazine, inspiring Muir to write:

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.[2]

In September 1978, I departed on my first high-country trip from Tuolumne Meadows. My wife, Barbara, and I spent two nights at Upper Fletcher Lake. Each sunrise, the lake’s thin layer of ice refracted the dawn light, and frost shimmered on the alpine meadows. Each evening as I watched the alpenglow on Mt. Conness, the Sierra Crest, and Cathedral Range, something invoked the essence of my being.

Now, on this first Monday in August 1998, I am saying good-bye to Barbara and our fourteen-year-old son, Gordon at the far end of the bridge over the Lyell Fork of the Tuolumne River. I will spend the next thirty-eight days with myself, the contents of my backpack, and the High Sierra.

You may well ask what possesses me to spend weeks alone in the mountains. On his first trip to Yosemite in 1868, Muir observed, “The magnitudes of the mountains are so great that unless seen and submitted to a good long time they are not seen or felt at all.”[3] Henry David Thoreau wrote of his sojourn at Walden Pond, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.”[4]

I wonder if those “essential facts of life” Muir and Thoreau found in the wild can be discovered in the confines of contemporary society. Whether on a picnic or a backpacking trip, for me and most people, nature is now a place to visit. In much of the world, even the relatively few individuals whose vocation requires daily interaction with nature remain within the boundaries of human civilization. Farmers manipulate nature, employing various innovations to better their crop yield, whether pesticides, supplements, and genetic engineering, or less intrusive organic methods. A botanist goes “out in the field,” but also returns home in an automobile to a house or apartment furnished with all the modern “conveniences.”

Our modern lives separate us from the natural world. Unlike our ancestors, most of us do not deal with wild nature on a daily basis except to worry about the weather. We human beings no longer think of ourselves as creatures of nature.

“One effect of the Technological Revolution has been to uproot us from the soil. We have become disoriented, I believe; we have suffered a kind of psychic dislocation of ourselves in time and space,” wrote N. Scott Momaday. “We may be perfectly sure of where we are, in relation to the supermarket and the next coffee break, but I doubt that any of us knows where he is in relation to the stars and to the solstices. Our sense of the natural order has become dull and unreliable. Like the wilderness itself, our sphere of instinct has diminished in proportion as we have failed to image truly what it is.”[5]

Human beings are currently in the midst of a fundamental transformation. The Industrial/Technological Revolution is the third of the great revolutions in *Homo sapiens*’ evolution. The first took place around 160,000 years ago, when the hunter-gatherer tribes undertook the great migration out of Africa. Unlike most other mammals, human beings adapted, survived, and eventually thrived in nearly every ecosystem on the planet. Yet those prehistoric humans remained entirely dependent upon the life forms residing in each ecosystem; they learned the best way to adapt to nature, not control it.

About ten thousand years ago, with the Agricultural Revolution, *Homo sapiens* took command of their sources of food and began growing crops to provide bread, fruits, and vegetables, and domesticating animals for milk and meat. After thousands of generations, the hunter-gatherer tribes became farming villagers. Their villages became towns and towns became cities. People no longer lived as members of a small tribe inhabiting the natural world; they became members of human society. Eventually, they manipulated nature not only to provide themselves with food and shelter, but to satisfy whimsical desires.

In the last two centuries, the Industrial/Technological Revolution has accelerated “progress,” isolating people in a world of our own making while altering our planet’s delicate ecology in ways that we in all our great knowledge cannot yet comprehend.

Contemplate the changes in America over the last century from the perspective of evolutionary time. In the blink of an evolutionary eye, the United States has gone from a “wilderness” inhabited by a relatively stable population of hunter-gatherers to agrarian rural communities to an industrial urban society to a post-industrial megalopolis. My aunt, born in 1914, the year John Muir died, remembers a time when there was no radio, no television, no electric ranges, microwave ovens, or computers, a time when real horsepower was a primary mode of transportation. This single lifetime witnessed a science fiction story come true.

We now live on a global, not a local scale. In the nineteenth century, most people were aware only of other people and events in their local communities. The little they knew of people and events in the outside world was learned days, weeks, even months later. Now we can know of and even observe a person or incident instantly anywhere in the world.

Though we’ve created technological innovations far beyond anything imagined by ancient civilizations, we remain the same people in terms of our fundamental beliefs. Able to observe

everything from a single atom to galaxies billions of light years away, we still view our place in existence from the perspective of our ancestors. We know so much yet are so unwise. We know things, not life. Perhaps if we reconnect to the natural world we can discover new ways of seeing human beings in relation to the rest of existence. For John Muir, “The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.”[6]

I will journey in the High Sierra to see and hear the lessons nature teaches us each and every day, lessons we as a species may be forgetting how to listen to.

The John Muir Trail in Tuolumne Meadows seems the right place to begin. I hug and kiss Barbara and Gordon good-bye and walk across the meadow on the far side of the Lyell Fork bridge. Before entering the woods, I look back one more time, wave farewell, and preserve that last look in my memory. Turning south, I hike up the well-trodden path toward my day’s destination on the far side of Donahue Pass, twelve miles away.

The first day of a backpacking trip is often the hardest. The pack weighs its heaviest. I am not fully acclimated to high altitude. An arduous climb is usually a necessary part of the first day’s hike. Today is the middle of a heat wave; in California’s Central Valley temperatures reach 110 and even here in the high country, it’s in the high 80s.

Beneath granite ridges and peaks, the John Muir Trail gradually ascends a glacial canyon with wide green meadows, flowers of every color, and pine forest; the Lyell Fork alternates spectacular whitewater and placid meandering. In many ways, Lyell Canyon is an ideal place for newcomers to be introduced to the High Sierra. At the age of two years and nine months Gordon went on his first backpacking trip here in June 1986. That early in the season, we had the canyon almost entirely to ourselves. In August, this is one of the most popular backcountry routes in the Sierra. Thousands of backpackers, day hikers, and pack stock have pulverized the trail into dry, sandy dust; the trail in many places is worn down to ruts a foot or two below the surface of the surrounding ground.

At the crossing of Rafferty Creek, the trail divides; a right turn heads up to Vogelsang, the left to Donahue Pass. I hope to descend from Vogelsang and return to this junction on September 9. I turn left and cross the wooden bridge over the rushing water of Rafferty Creek. My direction is easy to determine. Yosemite’s unique metal trail signs are hard to miss. The fact the mileage often computes differently from one sign to the next only adds to the sense that human standards are not part of the wilderness.

Five miles up the canyon, after crossing Ireland Creek beyond the camping complex at the Ireland Lake Trail junction, I feel I’ve truly entered the High Sierra wilderness; from here the solitude begins. Alone, hiking up Lyell Canyon, it is easy for my thoughts to wander.

The doubts that have haunted me over the past few months recite their familiar litany. Can something so large be translated by someone so small? Who am I to follow in Muir’s footsteps? Yet in hiking the High Sierra, each of us follows in those footsteps. And each of us remakes that experience into something deeply personal. Muir thought, “The life of a mountaineer is favorable to the development of soul-life as well as limb-life, each receiving abundance of exercise and abundance of food.”[7]

When I am in the wilderness I feel something undefinable and ultimately unexplainable. The alpenglow on granite peaks, the first light of day on tall pines, the scent of a redwood forest after a rain, the roaring of surf, the lap of a lake, the cry of a loon, the slap of a beaver's tail, the touch of the evening breeze, each and all reconnect me to life's infinite cycle.

Why we are so inspired by the wild takes us to the essence of the human condition. From human beings' early deification of trees, animals, and mountains to the present day, we've often associated wilderness with the spiritual. We tied nature to a deity or deities, seeing the "hand of God" in the wonders of nature. "In regard to nature it is not necessary for the Christian to know more than that the goodness of the Creator is the cause of all things," asserted St. Augustine.[8]

The religious beliefs that form the basis of all civilized societies were framed as humans finalized the transition from tribal bands to settled civilizations. The Bible's Old Testament tells the tale of a wandering tribe becoming a domesticated society. Buddha (563–483 BCE), Confucius (551–479 BCE), Lao Tse (570–490 BCE), Socrates (470–399 BCE), and the writers of the Old Testament (600–500 BCE) — the men who formulated the religious philosophies at the foundation of civilized societies — lived within a century of each other.

As humans became established as dwellers of villages, towns, and cities, the great thinkers' ideas reflected their society's pride in the seemingly unique human capabilities that created those "great" civilizations. Socrates proclaimed, "I am a lover of knowledge, and the men who dwell in the city are my teachers, and not the trees or the country." [9] As we became a species separate from wild nature, we created religions that recognized and even exalted that separation. Instead of gods personifying aspects of nature, gods reflected human nature. Could the conceptualization of those beliefs reflect *Homo sapiens*' estrangement from the wild?

What if I stand outside my cultural and religious biases and examine the assumptions of human societies? Until Galileo proved otherwise, humans believed that we lived at the center of the universe. As the dominant creatures of the planet at the center of the universe, humanity assumed we were the culmination of all creation. Even after Galileo, though we acknowledged the existence of Earth as a planet in our solar system, our view of humanity's place remained largely unchanged. In the authoritative natural history published during the eighteenth century French Enlightenment, author Georges-Louis Leclerc, proclaimed, "How beautiful is cultivated Nature! How pompous and brilliant, when decorated by the hand of man! He himself is her chief ornament, her noblest product. By multiplying his own species, he increases the most precious of her works." [10]

As a species that has existed only for a couple of million years in a universe approximately 13 billion years old, why do we continue to assume that our individual and collective welfare is the primary purpose of existence? Why should we assume a divine right to force life itself to conform to our wishes? Despite our desire for it to be otherwise, so far our cosmic significance is nil. But if we irrevocably alter billions of years of evolution, maybe our cosmic effect will be greater than we can imagine. As Muir discovered in the Sierra and asserted in one of the most profound sentences ever written, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." [11]



Mt. Lyell, Lyell Canyon, June 2008

Far up Lyell Canyon, I am startled from my revery as I recognize the scene before me: William Keith's painting of Mt. Lyell from Lyell Canyon, *Crown of the Sierra*. Before me spreads the meadow, pines, and creek with Mt. Lyell and its surrounding peaks rising in the background. Modern art critics maintain Keith exaggerated the grandeur of the Sierra; standing at this spot I think he tried to transfer the adoration he felt to paint and canvas. A close friend, Muir displayed Keith's paintings at his lectures. For Muir, "No mountains I know of are so alluring. None so hospitable, kindly, tenderly inspiring. It seems strange that everybody does not come at their call. They are given, like the Gospel, without money and without price." [12]

Where the trail turns up and away from the Lyell Fork, my growling stomach demands no climb before lunch. Leaning against a tree by the creek, I eat a salami sandwich with fresh lettuce, a mundane feature I know I will welcome as a gourmet delicacy in a couple of weeks. After I soak my feet, scarf, and hat in the cool water, I begin climbing switchbacks step by gasping step under the hot sun. Finally, I attain a view down the canyon, Mt. Dana in the distance. I feel like two people at once: the gung-ho leader marching forthright up the trail and the tired tourist trudging along.

For those concerned with such details, I am forty-seven years old, born on Manhattan Island in New York City. I'm 5'8", 155 pounds. Without my glasses, my vision is 20/200+ in each eye; in other words, I'm almost helpless without eyeglasses. I pack a spare pair.

I still carry a 1972 Kelty pack with its original frame and large red pack sack with no inner compartments and five outer pockets. After twenty-six years, I am rather emotionally attached to this pack as well as being used to it; besides, in this era of high-tech equipment it is a statement of simplicity. The Svigg Tourist cooking pots are also 26 years old, the two aluminum pots and one fry pan/lid pimpled with dents caused by numerous collisions with granite. The Coleman Peak 1 Feather 4000 stove is four years old. The sleeping bag is an old Eddie Bauer from the days when Bauer was renowned for making down clothing and sleeping bags, not as an upscale chain store. The tent is one of two new items, a Sierra Designs Orion CD, the lightest freestanding tent I could find. The other new piece of equipment is a cellular phone. Though we both understand the irony and absurdity of carrying this piece of modern technology into the Sierra wilderness, Barbara and I decided it is the best way to reassure each other of our safety during our longest separation in twenty-eight years. However, we do not know if the thing will work since no one at any cellular company can attest to the actual coverage in the Sierra backcountry.

While wearing low-cut hiking shoes, socks, T-shirt, shorts, scarf, and hat, I also carry a pair of lightweight ankle-high hiking boots, two T-shirts and underwear, spare shorts, two pairs of socks, sweat pants, polartec jacket, wool sweater, raincoat (a "shell" as equipment manufacturers like to term it), ensolite pad, water filter, two Nalgene bottles for water, spreading knife, fork, spoon, cup, Swiss army knife, needle-nosed pliers (which double as a pot grabber), a whistle I hope to never use, a spare pack strap, compass, several 7.5-minute maps, mini Mag-lite, two spare AAA batteries, trekking pole, first-aid kit, insect repellent, suntan lotion, toothbrush, toothpaste, a chunk from a bar of soap, razor, matches, toilet paper, comb, a few feet of duct tape wound around a pen, four more pens, two 5x8 notebooks, a copy of *Walden*, Leica M2 camera with a Summicron 35mm lens, lens paper, ten rolls of film, Gitzo 126 tripod, two fifty foot lengths of nylon cord and two stuff bags for hanging my food to thwart bears, and hopefully enough of that food for the sixteen or seventeen days to reach Cedar Grove in King's Canyon, where I will resupply.

After the hot, steep climb, the trail meanders more gradually up through the forest to a crossing of the Lyell Fork on a wooden bridge. I enter timberline country, the most precarious and precious lifezone of the Sierra. A lush green meadow colored by wildflowers and scattered whitebark pines sits below the Sierra Crest and the pinnacle of Mt. Lyell. I come to what in this summer following El Niño will be a common occurrence: a wade across a rushing creek. In a normal summer, it would be an easy rock hop across, but this year the water remains high even in early August. Three men approach from the other direction. While they scout a dry crossing, I take off my socks, put back on my shoes, get out my trekking pole, and step into the cold water. On this hot day, it feels good. After crossing, I put on my socks and dry hiking boots.

This summer after El Niño requires responding to the Sierra wilderness without prior expectations, reacting to the conditions of the moment. The snowmelt brings forth new flowers; creeks rise and fall daily; tomorrow will be different. I have the opportunity not only to observe but to live with those daily changes.

The trail winds through a maze of running water, from narrow rivulets to yard-wide creeks to whitewater torrents. The trail disappears and reappears as it ascends between snow patches. As

is often the case, the best views aren't from the top of the pass itself. At a point where the trail temporarily levels before the final climb, I see down the length of Lyell Canyon. From this vantage point, the ancient path of Mt. Lyell's still-living glacier is obvious. In the nineteenth century, Muir and his glaciation theory were ridiculed by Josiah Whitney, Clarence King, and other leading scientists. Today's Whitneys and Kings deride those who tell us of climate change, the depletion of aquifers, and other environmental warning signs.

From the daily extinction of species to the shrinking of the ozone layer, we already have an overwhelming abundance of scientific evidence testifying to our destruction of our planet's ecology. While scientific analysis may not be able to specify every cause and effect of each facet of human pollution, by observing the changes taking place over the last century, it is obvious that humanity has harmed the ecosystems that support life. The air, the water, the plants, the animals, even the rocks — all have been altered, not by the natural gradual processes of evolution, but by the relatively split-second actions of the human species. Exactly when we will trigger ecological annihilation on an apocalyptic scale is not known — 25 years? 50 years? 100 years? 200 years? From the perspective of evolutionary time, it's the *what* not the *when* that matters.

The results of our actions outpace our knowledge and understanding of their repercussions. To put it simply, we do not know what we have done and what we are doing. If an environmentalist is someone who believes that we need to preserve and take care of our natural world, than any person who does not consider him- or herself an environmentalist is suicidal.

I see no point in cataloguing our past, current, and possible future environmental follies. We are inundated with books, articles, and websites offering litanies of practical suggestions of "things we can do to save the environment." Legislating and bureaucratically overseeing the daily private and public behavior of every individual is repugnant in terms of individual liberty as well as being the sort of solution that usually only exacerbates the problem it wishes to remedy. While we can legislate to require more fuel-efficient engines, encourage recycling, or ban toxic substances, those remedies are merely stopgap measures. This is not simply a practical problem that will be solved by the correct government regulations. True change cannot be dictated by bureaucratic rules.

True change can only come when individuals choose to transform their way of thinking. We humans need to redefine our relationship to the natural world, not only ecologically, but also from a social, political, and, above all, spiritual perspective. When we think about nature differently, then we will also live with it differently.

I feel the secret is here in the Sierra wilderness. Far below my viewpoint, the silvery ribbon of the Lyell Fork twists through green meadows framed by granite ridges. Near my feet, bright-colored clusters of wildflowers spring forth from the white snow and gray granite.

I turn and head up to Donahue Pass. The trail is now invisible under deep snow. Previous footsteps disappear in a moonscape pockmarked by small snow craters, a Sierra phenomenon referred to as "sun cups." Snow in the summer is usually fun. There's a giddy excitement to a snowball fight in August, skiing down a slope on your feet (*glissading* it's called), or simply seeing the white snow suffused with shades of pink and blue.

Three weeks ago, Barbara, Gordon, and I spent a few days camped in a snow-free spot in a small grove of whitebarks between two unnamed creeks in Humphrey's Basin. In the summer warmth, we were surrounded by snow. When Gordon was younger, he and I appreciated the sensation of walking barefoot over snow. Hiking through snow while in T-shirt and shorts is part of summer in the Sierra.

I walk diagonally up the slope to Donahue Pass, my steps sinking in the mushy top layer above the tightly packed snow. As I reach a pile of rocks, a metal sign ahead informs me that I've reached the top. There is something comforting about being told the long climb is over and knowing exactly where I stand, though the summit of the pass is obvious. We humans like having the obvious confirmed by outside authority. In these times, any hiker can know exactly where he or she is at every moment. Expensive high-tech devices permit one to pinpoint his or her location by bouncing a signal off a satellite and coordinating it to a computerized map. It is no longer necessary to become so intimately connected to the landscape to determine where one is.



Donahue Pass, suncups

At the top of the pass, I pull out my own piece of modern technology. The tiny screen informs me I have a sufficient signal. I carefully push the buttons of the familiar numbers. I hear a ring. Barbara answers. She and Gordon are safely home, and they know I am over the pass. While they drove over two hundred miles, I walked a dozen.

I hike down through snow, following the tracks of previous hikers, and spy the first whitebarks among the maze of snowmelt-fed creeks that converge in the meadow below the crest. After a few minutes of walking, I leave the trail, find a spot that will serve as a campsite, and begin the routine of setting up camp.

Following a dinner of ramen noodles and carrots, it is still warm enough to sit in shorts. To the south and east, a violet glow — “the purple mountains’ majesty” — fills the sky above the peaks and ridges extending across the horizon. The violet slowly rises, leaving a layer of deep blue between a pink sky and the tops of the peaks. James S. Hutchinson, who with Joseph LeConte and Duncan McDuffie made the first complete high-country journey from Yosemite to King’s Canyon in 1908, observed, “the sunset lights on the mountains are always the finest, far surpassing the lights of sunrise.”[13]

When it gets dark, I crawl in the tent; the numerous mosquitos discourage sleeping outside. I leave the rainfly off to watch the stars and nearly full moon and slip into sleep under the soft, white moonlight.