

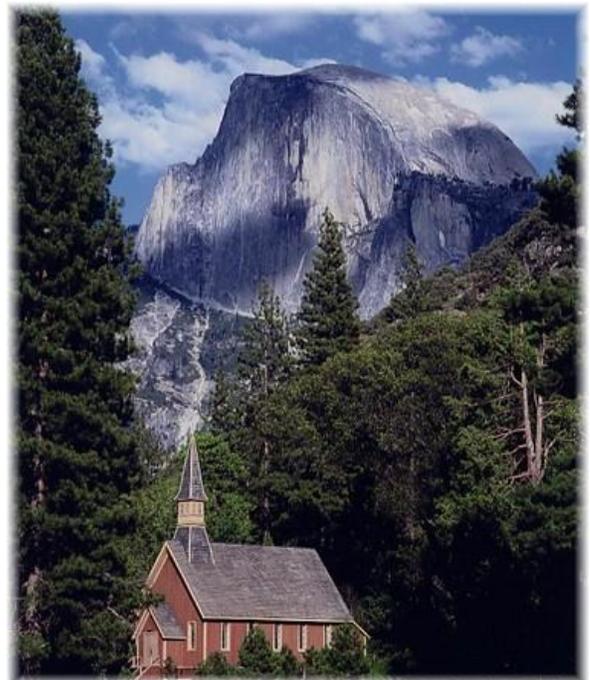
I Have Been to the Mountain Top – A Dream Deeply Rooted In the American Dream.

This week we celebrate the ministry of Martin Luther King. While the bulk of his *dream* speech (see <http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html>) is about racial freedom and justice, it concludes on an ecumenical note. King leaves the topic of the Negro in his hometown and expands into the mountains of New England and the west – and for some reason, he begins not with the cities and towns where the justice of civil rights remains undone, but he proclaims freedom from the mountain tops, from nature, from creation in which we abide with God face to face. He sings of religious harmony as he suspends his Negro heritage and harks to his mission as a minister. It is his last line and last wish that: "all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing..."

John Muir writes, "How strangely we are blinded to beauty and color, form and motion... Compared with other things in God's creation, the difference is nothing." When the first genomes were mapped a decade ago, researchers were most shocked by how similar creatures are; they speculated man and mouse perhaps sharing half the genome structure in common, in fact, it was 90%. We are all very similar.

Our Earth and its inhabitants is the only known biosphere – a self-contained system capable of sustaining life. Despite the dedication of hundreds of scientists, millions of dollars, and the novelty of Biosphere II in the Arizona desert, the only sustainable harmony and balance is found in nature. In every other venture from moon mission to summer camping, we stock up on resources, exhaust them, and then turn outside the system for replenishment; only through an adaptive ecosystem on our Earth is the cycle of life continuous.

The great paradox is that while life as a whole is highly resilient, each life form itself is utterly fragile. This resiliency is manifest throughout Earth's history. I used to think that there was one major extinction which took away our dinosaurs, but gave us lots of oil in return. In fact, there have been 5 major extinctions – major being defined as 50% of species were lost. That is not merely 50% of creatures dying, that is 50% of entire species being eradicated. When you do the math, 98% of all documented species are now extinct. The probability of homo sapiens surviving the next major, or even minor extinction, I would say is remote. Life evolved from the ocean; I sometimes wonder, as land life becomes extinct, will the evolution of creatures return to the vast sea? It is also true that each individual life is fragile – and important, and meaningful. Which of us is not carefully planning our very own life and death? Which of us is not daily affected by the precarious welfare of those close to us? Which of us is not sickened by a precious life nurtured in



Yosemite Chapel below Half Dome

childhood, schooled into adolescence, blossomed into a loving, creative adult, and expunged by a single bullet? Classes of people and species will always survive. But until, as it is written in the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, “I will call you each by name”, until we see each person as an individual human being, each of us remains thwarted from becoming fully human. I have discovered in my travels that strangers are simply neighbors we haven’t met yet. That is the challenge: not just to be cerebrally compassionate, or to be charitable towards classes of people, but to love each person individually as ourselves.

This welfare for one another extends even beyond our human brethren. As John Muir was writing in 1867 well before genome research, “How narrow we selfish, conceited creatures are in our sympathies! how blind to the rights of all the rest of creation!” This species prejudice stems from the same racial prejudice exposed by Martin Luther King: “We cannot walk alone.... the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.” As the biblical lawyer queried the rabbi, “Who is my neighbor?” so too, we must ask ourselves if our outlook is ecumenical and whether we are able to see our Earth as our community and its inhabitants as our neighbors.
