

By Dan Sapon

Yosemite's Vernal Falls: Again and Still

The First Time

The first time was about 45 years ago. It wasn't my first time in Yosemite National Park but, still an undergraduate at Santa Clara University, some older college friends determined that my education would not be complete until I hiked up to the Vernal Falls Bridge, climbed the slippery stone stairway up the Mist Trail to the top of the falls, to see (and hear) the world from there. It wasn't really an "I dare you" kinda thing; it was more like: "You've never done that?!" They appeared to be stunned. My cousin Jim, his wife Cookie, and their friends Tim and Mike often advised me of the things that I **MUST** experience as I followed them through the Santa Clara University experience. This hike up to Vernal Falls was apparently one of those.

My answer was simply "OK." In the presence of my 'elders,' I had learned to do what I was told.

Following one of Jim's many specific instructions (he was four years ahead of me and had been my idol since I was a kid), I had completed his academic prerequisite to the Vernal Falls experience the previous quarter. When I was a freshman (and he was in graduate school), he made it clear that I needed to take Dr. Nyquist's "Introduction to Classical Music" course as a elective. "Why?" I wanted to know.

"Because Dr. Nyquist won't let you take his upper-division "Bach" class unless you have taken his 'Intro' course; and you have to do that."

"Oh, I see."

I was told to become familiar with Bach's *Tocatta in F Major*. Jim and his friends had decided, after hearing Dr. Nyquist play this challenging piece on the organ, that it should be called "*The Waterfall Tocatta*." They said I would understand when I stood beside the top of the falls on the rocks of the Mist Trail.

I was also told what to do when I arrived at that required destination: "Let your eyes follow the water from the top where it explodes out of the Emerald Pool all the way to the bottom. Watch the water tumbling down in free fall, merging with other spouts of water and then dividing into smaller rivulets as it splashes and bounces off the rocks all the way down, until it joins the larger turbulent pool constantly forming and re-forming

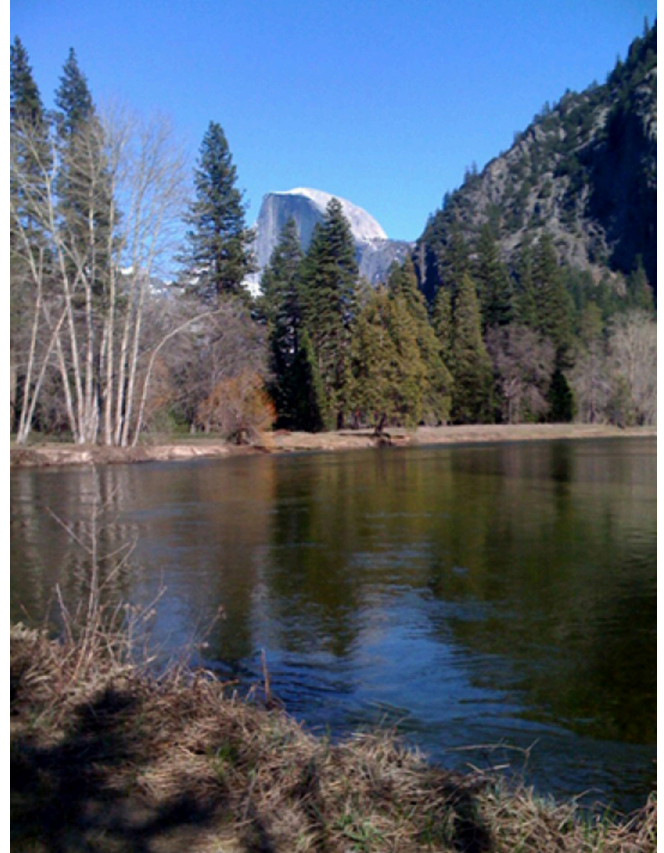
at the bottom. Then, let your eyes follow the water back to the top and repeat the path back down. Then, tell me what you *hear*."

Sure enough, Bach's *Waterfall Toccata* is the soundtrack of Vernal Falls. Try it! [*iTunes* will sell you the classic E. Power Biggs performance of this piece for ninety-nine cents -- or you can just listen at the link below.]

Was It Really Ten Years Ago?



Every year since late in the previous century, Gretta and I have visited Yosemite during the first week of April celebrating our April 4 wedding anniversary. During our 2005 visit, we sat one afternoon beside the Merced River on the valley floor (a typical behavior for us -- she drawing pictures in watercolor and me scribbling in a notebook). We convinced ourselves that we were still young enough to hike up to the source of this meandering stream ("How long could it take, really?"). So, the next morning we put on daypacks and took the shuttle to Happy Isles to begin the up-and-down hike (OK, it was mostly up) to the Vernal Falls Bridge; but we didn't stop there (remember, we were 'young enough' back then). Past the bridge, we continued along the John Muir Trail to an amazing spot where you can look at both sources of the Merced River. From that spot, you can look down at Vernal Falls and up at Nevada Falls, while standing on the same rock. [Take a look at <https://convivio-online.net/?p=185> for THAT story ("*A Place To Stand, A Moment To Savor*")]



But I digress . . .

Fast-Forward To Today -- April 4, 2015

By now I have drifted past my 65th birthday, ten years have passed from that day Gretta and I were "young enough" to undertake our adventure up above Vernal Falls and we are here again in Yosemite once again celebrating our special day. This time one of our sons and his wife, Matt and Nou, are here with us. Gretta's sensitive back prohibits a repeat hike up to that rock; but the 'young-uns' offered to escort me up the mountain (presumably to make sure I survived), so off we went.

So, ten years on, what was different? What was the same?

First thing: I had no intention of hiking as far as Gretta and I had gone a decade before -- that had been four-plus hours of endurance -- that would be for the 'young enough' folks to do. My goal was to make it to the Vernal Falls Bridge, just close enough to find out if Bach's *Waterfall Toccata* was still the sound track of the falling waters and to get a good photo (evidence of my accomplishment).



Second thing: it didn't take long to learn that my 'wind' was not what it used to be ten years before. I had to stop and '*admire the scenery*' (i.e., catch my breath) about a dozen times along the 0.8-mile trek ("That's all? Less than a mile?!" I asked to nobody in particular as I read the sign on the way back down.) Matt and Nou played the role of the 'young enough' this time and went on ahead farther up the Mist Trail to get a better picture of the falls.

The third thing I learned was that the trail was inhabited by two distinct populations: families with small children (kids with smiles that were not even saying "are we there yet?") and people who were older than me. I found both of these observations to be encouraging signs -- 1) we old folks 'still got it' and 2) parents are still exposing their small children to the wonders of Yosemite.

Fourth: I observed first hand that the California Drought was very real. Every time I had seen the top of Vernal Falls over the years, it had been a solid wall of water raging out from the top and landing quite a distance from the rock

face. This time the 'wall of water' did not fully span the space across the top -- as you can see from the photo -- and it dropped straight down past.

Fifth: It's still here -- same as me. Just as we both were 45 years ago, just as we were ten years ago, still playing the same music, at least in my imagination. Today, neither of us are as vigorous and powerful as we were then, but seasons change, eh? I'm happy to find it here where I left it -- once again and still.

