



A VISIT TO PLANET EARTH

by Jim Wesley, OFS

At the time of this writing, I am one individual of the 7.8 billion human beings currently inhabiting this small planet somewhere in the vast universe, and because I speak English, I refer to my home planet as Earth. This planetary home is approximately 4.5 billion years old, and life has existed on its surface for the past 3.5 billion years. Modern humans, *Homo sapiens*, are a very recent life form, having been present on the planet for only 200,000 years. An interesting comparison is that the dinosaurs began roaming the earth 245 million years ago and disappeared from the earth about 66 million years ago. They were the dominant terrestrial life form for approximately 179 million years.

When considering the age of the earth and the length of time that the dinosaurs existed, a human's life span with an average age of about 80 years is really an infinitesimal amount of time. To help put this into perspective, imagine all the earth's geologic time transposed to an annual calendar of 365 days (31,536,000 seconds). All of human history, since the last ice-age, would have occurred in the final 82.2 seconds of a calendar year; the existence of an individual person would be about half a second. This humbling reality means that that my entire life on this planet is really only a visit — a very short visit.

The earth is in orbit around a yellow dwarf star that we humans refer to as the Sun. This star, along with its eight orbiting planets, some moons, asteroids, comet material, rocks, and dust, comprises our solar system. Another humbling fact is that our Sun is just one star among hundreds of billions of stars in our Milky Way Galaxy, and our galaxy is one of the billions of galaxies that make up the universe. When viewed in this context, Earth is simply a mere speck in the immense Universe.

While writing this, I began to think that, if we are individually only temporary visitors on Earth, what kind of experience are we entitled to, how do we conduct ourselves during our visit, and how do we leave the planet after we are gone?

One of my favorite places to spend some of my Earth time is Yosemite National Park. Each time I visit the park, I go there knowing that I am a visitor and that I need to abide by certain rules and standards of behavior. The mission statement of the National Park Service is clear and concise: "*The National Park Service is dedicated to conserving unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the various parks for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations.*"

My closing thought is really a question. Is there a mission statement for living on the planet Earth? During our short visit on the planet, do we follow the wisdom of basic guidelines that ensure our enjoyable, informative, and inspiring life experience, and will this experience be available to all future generations?