

God and Nature in Thomas Starr King's "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada" and "Living Waters from Lake Tahoe"

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In the early days of Unitarianism and Universalism in America, there was no field of environmental ethics, no concept of studying the interplay of theology and ecology. Therefore, to understand the history of Unitarian and Universalist theologies and ethics related to the environment, one must do some sleuthing. This paper is part of a larger project of discovering how Unitarian and Universalist theologies and ethics developed relative to the environment in California and the American West. In a denomination with a long history of affirming ministers' and members' freedom of religious beliefs, we turn not to creed nor to dogma but to the professions of particularly influential clergy and denominational leaders. Prior to the rise of theologians in academia, the men and women doing the work of the church in the world were also the church's theologians. In the 19th century on the West Coast of the United States, one of the most influential ministers was Rev. Thomas Starr King.¹ He, in turn, was one of few thinkers and socio-political leaders of his day with explicit affection for the natural world.² For these reasons, his work is a welcome entryway.

Most of the scholarship available concerning the life and work of Thomas Starr King focuses on his accomplishments, which were many, and his character, which was admirable.³ Very little attention has been paid to his contributions as a theologian. In this paper, I focus on a close reading of two of his sermons, "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada" and "Living Waters from Lake Tahoe." They are unique among the twenty-two sermons preserved and collected by Edwin Whipple in their focus on the natural world.

They distinguish themselves from his other nature writings, his book on the White Hills of New Hampshire and his descriptions of California's scenery to the *Boston Evening Transcript*, by their explicitly religious themes.⁴ They present themselves as intriguing texts to unpack Starr King's understanding of God, God's relation to God's creations, and the implications of his theology for Unitarian Universalism's position in the current field of environmental ethics.

Setting the Context

The steamer carrying Thomas Starr King arrived in San Francisco on April 28, 1860.⁵ This new city was as strange as it was thrilling for the young Unitarian minister from Boston. The discovery of gold and silver in the mountains of California had caused a rapid influx of European-American settlers in the area, some of whom were rough and tough outcasts of more established communities on the Eastern seaboard. Chinese immigrants fleeing governmental instability and poverty came through San Francisco on their way to work in the gold fields of the Sierra Nevada as well. By the 1860s European miners, through violence and an unfair system of taxation, forcibly displaced many of the Chinese miners, some of whom returned to San Francisco for work. Gold fever also brought immigrants from Australia, Mexico, South America, and Canada. Entrepreneurs harvested the abundant natural resources of the San Francisco Bay Area and Northern California and harnessed them for their uses. Pick ax, shovel, and later giant hydraulic nozzles dug into mountainsides.⁶ Men felled trees for lumber and cleared forests for farmland. They fished the oceans, rivers and mountain lakes. Blessed and encouraged by the new nation's Manifest Destiny, the Western settlers were part of an intentional

process of colonization and genocide to claim what had been American Indian and Mexican land and make it part of the European-American's United States of America.⁷

While mining may have been the main attraction in the San Francisco region, the new communities needed trades people, farmers, merchants, and civil servants. Others, like Starr King, came to play their part in shaping the religious and moral values of the young city.⁸ Law and order were shaky at best. California's relationship with the Union was uncertain. The major social institutions of church, state, school, healthcare, and social welfare were young and pliable, if they existed at all. Social mores for interacting across cultural differences, civic standards for care of less fortunate people, the roles of religions in society, and the relationships of people to the natural world were all open for debate. It was a time of enormous creative energy when men and women of power could influence the ethic of the new city.⁹

Thomas Starr King served as the minister of the First Unitarian Church of San Francisco for four years, until his death in March of 1864. Before coming to California, he was considered one of the best preachers in Boston, but it was in this new land that his genius blossomed. In addition to his preaching and pastoral duties, Starr King lectured up and down the coast on topics such as religion, philosophy, poetry, and patriotism. General Winfield Scott, general-in-chief of the Union Army, and President Abraham Lincoln maintained that Starr King had "saved California to the Union."¹⁰ After securing that victory, he went on to raise money for the United States Sanitary Commission to aid sick and wounded Civil War soldiers. He secured over one and one quarter million dollars from California, a fourth of all the funds raised from the whole country.¹¹

Already known as a naturalist in New England because of his widely popular book, *The*

White Hills: Their Legends, Landscape, and Poetry, his numerous letters to the *Boston Evening Transcript* acquainted a generation of people of the East Coast with the awe-inspiring natural beauty of the Western Coast and the Sierra Nevada.¹² Recognizing that homesteading and commercial ventures could harm the beauty of Yosemite Valley, he used his nationwide audience to press for it to be designated as a public park.¹³ Much beloved in his lifetime by Californians from all walks of life and strikingly influential in the course of the young state in his four years as its citizen, he was designated as one of California's two representatives in the National Hall of Fame in the Capitol in Washington, D.C., where his statue remained until earlier this year when it was replaced by one of Ronald Reagan.

Following Starr King's death, Edwin Whipple collected his sermons in a book entitled *Christianity and Humanity*. It was widely read on both coasts. This paper examines two sermons from that volume to analyze their expression of Unitarian theology and ethics related to the environment in the later part of the nineteenth century.

Expression of God's Love

Historians have located Starr King in one of the streams of Unitarian theology in antebellum America – Liberal Christianity.¹⁴ It was an identity he professed for himself. To the ministerial search committee in San Francisco he writes, "I shall go to you in the hope of using all the powers that may be continued to me for your permanent strength as a Liberal Christian parish."¹⁵ Several qualities characterized Liberal Christianity in the antebellum era: the appeal to reason and intuition as the final authority in religious life and Biblical interpretation, the belief in a loving Fatherly God and the humanity of Jesus,

the affirmation of the moral perfectibility of humankind through lifelong education, and the devotion to virtue as the sign of living a Christian life.¹⁶

Within the Unitarian denomination, Liberal Christianity represented a theological position distinct from, though related to, Old Unitarianism. Founded a generation before Starr King, Old Unitarianism stemmed from the thought of William Ellery Channing and others. Their Christianity insisted on a rational interpretation of the Bible. Though they rejected the doctrine of the trinity and original sin, they retained the life and teachings of Christ as the center of their faith and the source of religious authority. Liberal Christianity was an outgrowth of Emersonian Transcendentalism, which broadened the sources of religious truth beyond the Bible to include personal experience of the world gained through intuition as well as reason and the senses.¹⁷ Therefore, while ministers of other faiths may have found nature as the teaching subject of a sermon to be objectionable, the path had already been cleared in Unitarianism for it to be acceptable.

In the two sermons, “Lessons from the Sierra Nevada” and “Living Waters from Lake Tahoe,” Starr King brings together his profession of a loving God with aspects of Emersonian Transcendentalism, using Lake Tahoe and the Sierra Nevada as his “texts.” In both sermons, he returns again and again to the theme that the beauty of nature demonstrates God’s love. He preaches, “Brethren, this question of color in nature, broadly studied, leads us quickly to contemplate and adore the love of God.”¹⁸ For him, the created world was a gift from God, and its beauty a sign of a loving God. “The color of the world is part of the Gospel of the world. It is an utterance of love; it is a prophecy of grace.”¹⁹ Here we see the notion that God teaches humankind about God-self through the “Gospel of the world,” and the world reveals a God of love and grace. Starr King

argues that a God concerned solely with omnipotence and impressing upon human kind God's awfulness would choose a much more drab and austere landscape, "... how easily the world could have been made more somber,... how easily the general effect of extended landscapes might have been monotonous and gloomy!"²⁰ To Starr King, the very existence of the Sierra Nevada and Lake Tahoe, in all their multi-faceted beauty, serves as a proof of a loving God.

To highlight his position, Starr King contrasts it with that of the Quakers, Calvinists, and Catholics. All of Starr King's biographers speak of his broad catholic sensibility. He reflects his appreciation of other religious sects in this passage even while he critiques their theology:

I love the Quaker simplicity and calm. The Quaker conception of life and worship is part of the protest of the spirit against errors and poverty in the Church. But God is not an infinite Quaker, though he is the infinite Friend. The world is not clothed with russet, and the flowers are not gray, and the wind is not forbidden to play on the forest harps. I bow to the strength of Calvinistic character, and its service in the education of the human race in rugged resistance to tyranny and the rugged assertion of the holiness of God. But nature is not Calvinistic in color...I know how much devotion to truth and how much self-sacrifice are represented by the cowl and girdle of the friar and by the simple bonnet of the nun. But there is only here and there a barren waste that wears the drapery of the monastery; the harmonies of natural beauty run far up into the chords of cheer and joy.²¹

This passage highlights Unitarianism's unique position among its neighboring Christian faiths. All around him in the natural world of California in the 1860s, Starr King finds evidence for a loving God who rejoices in God's creation. He stakes out a place for

Unitarianism as an expression of Christianity that finds the “harmonies of natural beauty” deeply good and that affirms the holiness of color, cheer and joy.

In “Lessons from the Sierra Nevada,” Starr King critiques the materialism of his era. He says, “The great bane of modern life is materialism, – the divorce of spirit from power, order, bounty, and beauty in our thought of the world. We look upon nature as a machine, a play of forces that run of necessity and of course. We do not bow before it with wonder and awe as the manifestation of a present all-animating will and art.”²² In this critique of modern life in mid-19th century California, he rejects the commonly held view of nature as a machine, devoid of spirit and useful only in its ability to provide for human kind. Here also he takes issue with the dualism inherited from the Enlightenment era that separates spirit from body.

He offers a different possibility. He speaks of bowing to nature, beholding it with wonder and awe. He comes close to an understanding of God *in* nature, “the manifestation of a present all-animating will and art.” But he stops short of the pantheism of Emerson and some of the Transcendentalists. He speaks repeatedly of God as Creator, Creative Spirit, the Almighty, the Creative Art. He values nature not as God itself, but as a testament of the God who created it. “If we could fairly perceive through our outward senses, one or two features of the constant order and glory of nature, our materialistic dullness would be broken, surprise and joy would be awakened, we should feel that we live amid the play of Infinite thought; and the devout spirit would be stimulated so potently that our hearts would naturally mount in praise and prayer.”²³ It is as if God created the beauty of the earth to remind us to stay awake and sensitive to surprise and joy, and Starr King maintains the only possible response when beholding

such beauty is to offer “praise and prayer” to the Creator. In his view, nature is worthy of our full attention with an attitude of wonder because it reflects the glory and love of God.

The World Created for God’s Enjoyment

At one point in “Lessons from the Sierra Nevada,” Starr King expounds upon the generosity and creativity of God by explaining how nature’s bounty is all for humankind, “for his [sic] education, for his delight, for his food, for his equipment, for his coronation, through the comprehension and the right use of it all, with glory and honor.”²⁴ Such a view of humankind’s right to dominion over the earth, tempered by notions of wise stewardship had yet to be challenged in Starr King’s time. While he rejects a mechanistic view of nature, it comes as no surprise when he says that nature exists for humankind’s “right use of it all.”

His contradictory view in “Living Waters from Lake Tahoe” is more unexpected. He says of the lake, “It seems to exist for beauty.”²⁵ Later he elaborates:

And though no human eyes should ever look upon it, it would serve a holy purpose, as a gem of the Divine art, by giving pleasure to the Almighty... the Infinite mind and art rejoices in the glory of his creations.... He delights in his works.... And it is our sovereign privilege that we are called to the possibility of sympathy with his joy. The universe is the home of God. He has lined its walls with beauty. He has invited us into his palace. He offers to us the glory of sympathy with his mind. By love of nature, by joy in the communion with its beauty, by growing insight into the wonder of color, form and purpose, we enter into fellowship with the Creative art. We go into harmony with God.²⁶

He offers another reason for nature's existence – for the delight, joy, and pleasure of God. Here is the radical assertion that not only is God's creation deeply good, but that God takes joy in it. Moreover, humankind's ability to take pleasure in the natural world is "our sovereign privilege." He suggests that we can "go into harmony with God" through the possibility of "sympathy with his joy." We do this through "love of nature" and through "joy in the communion with its beauty." There is a significant shift here away from God giving creation to human kind for our uses. Instead, he depicts the universe as God's home into which we have been invited as guests. Nature in this view is a path to God. Rather than conceiving of God as being pleased by humankind's dominion over the earth, Starr King offers us a God who enjoys nature for its own sake, in its beauty, color, form, and purpose, and calls us to share in that joy.

God's Power Reflected in a Living Earth

For Starr King, all of nature's grandiosity signified God's power. "...and all this force is in the hand of God. His will is the fountain of it, his thought is the guide of it."²⁷ In this respect, Liberal Christians did not differ from their more Orthodox cousins. James Freeman Clarke writes in his 1884 *Manuel of Unitarian Belief*, "Unitarians believe that God is... omnipotent and omnipresent."²⁸ What is unusual in Starr King's sermons is the degree to which he ascribed nature with qualities of something living. The mountains, he says, "are not dead mounds of matter." He goes on, "The seeming granite permanence is the confession of passion and unrest. The incalculable weight of the hills is the sign of a fury before which all weight is a toy."²⁹ Passion, unrest, fury... all point to the animating power of God. They also point to an earth that is "not dead mounds of matter," but rather something living and dynamic.

The sermon title, “Living Waters from Lake Tahoe,” depicts the lake as having this same animate quality. In the second part of the sermon, he harkens back to the historical Lake Gennesareth, which Starr King calls “the fountain-head of a living water that has flowed equally to all palaces and huts, and that has quenched a thirst in souls of all conditions.”³⁰ Christian tradition is full of references to this water of life, codified in the ritual of baptism. But Starr King takes it one step further. He writes, “In fact the lake seems to be conscious.”³¹ He goes on to say the lake seems to guard its own purity by rejecting sediment from the mountain streams that feed it. He does not elaborate on the consciousness of the lake, but its mention is yet another significant departure from the mechanistic view of nature so common in his time. Starr King makes a bid for perceiving nature not as inert “dead matter,” but as a life-giving, if not living, manifestation of God’s animating power.

Seeing

The opening paragraphs of “Living Waters from Lake Tahoe” are filled with vivid descriptions of his first encounter with the lake. He speaks of the “jagged pinnacles,” the “groves of pine,” and the “expanse of level blue that mocks the azure into which its guardian towers soar.”³² In paragraph after paragraph, he continues to describe the quality of the air, size of the lake, and he returns to the color. He says, “It is precisely as if we were looking on an immense floor of lapis lazuli set within a ring of flaming emerald.”³³ For Starr King, this brilliant color and beauty is evidence of God’s love, as discussed earlier. There is more to note, however, in his particular way of seeing.

Starr King's seeing of the natural beauty in California is more than mere looking; it is an open receptivity, a deep attention. In "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada," Starr King speaks of the geologist Von Buch in the Alps being "absorbed in silent contemplation of the grandeur of the scene."³⁴ This state of seeing that totally engages the whole person was not foreign to the experience of Starr King, himself. In the memoir of Starr King's life that opens *Christianity and Humanity*, Edwin Whipple recounts a personal experience of being with Starr King in the White Mountains. He writes, "The talk between us had been very hilarious, when suddenly we came upon a magnificent view. The reins quickly loosened in his hands; his eyes, his whole countenance, became irradiated by that peculiar light which indicates the complete absorption of the soul in the beauty and grandeur it contemplates."³⁵ Such an experience of non-separation echoes that of Christian mystics, and certainly has precedent among the Transcendentalists.

He asks his listeners to "bow reverently before the mountains." He says, "Love of nature has its root in wonder and veneration."³⁶ His act of seeing is infused with qualities of love, wonder, and reverence. At a time when the forests, lakes and mountains were seen primarily for the benefit they could offer to the new economies of the coast – mining, fishing, and timber – Starr King offers his listeners another possibility. Love, wonder, and veneration all require receptivity to the natural world, a relationship of mutual exchange. Only something intrinsically valuable elicits veneration, wonder, and love. He asks his listeners to see the natural world with new eyes.

Implications for Environmental Ethics

Starr King urges his listeners to place their attention on the beauty of the geographic features of the landscape. He does not suggest a casual glance, but rather an attention filled with wonder, veneration, and love. In the field of ethics, Iris Murdoch builds on a notion of attention formulated by Simone Weil. Iris Murdoch writes, “I have used the word ‘attention,’ which I borrow from Simone Weil, to express the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality. I believe this to be the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent.”³⁷ She goes on to say, “I can only choose within the world I can see.”³⁸ Starr King brings this quality of attention to the natural world for a generation of Californians, and through his letters to the *Boston Evening Transcript*, to hundreds of others on the Eastern seaboard. In doing so he cracks open the door for Lake Tahoe and the Sierra Nevada to be seen as having intrinsic value. I do not want to overstate Starr King’s moral vision related to the natural landscape of California. Yet, I do want to suggest that his very choice to attend to the environment in this way creates a motion, the beginning steps of a dance, which can be picked up and elaborated on in later decades. It opens up the possibility that the natural world could be considered in an ethical encounter.

Characterizing Starr King’s moral vision related to the natural world requires the recognition that it is multi-dimensional and at times contradictory. In “Lessons from the Sierra Nevada,” Starr King suggests Creation to be a gift from a loving God to humankind for our right use – for food, delight, education, equipment and so forth. This view is aligned with the one Lynn White succinctly critiqued in the mid-1960s during the early development of environmental ethics. In his seminal essay he critiqued the

ubiquitous position in American Christianity that the earth was given to humankind to have dominion over it. He writes, “Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions (except perhaps Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends....We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.”³⁹ It is not unexpected for a European-American Christian in Starr King’s time to hold the dualistic view of spirit and nature that White critiques and to place human beings at the top of a hierarchy of Creation, relegating all the “lower” forms of the natural world to meet the needs of humankind.

More surprising are Starr King’s assertions that humankind is called to love nature and that nature exists to give pleasure to God. Sally McFague critiques the propensity of traditional Christian theology to eschew and disparage bodies including the body of earth and the natural world. She writes, “Christian theologies as well as works of spirituality have not encouraged meditation on the beauty, preciousness, and vulnerability of the earth and its many creatures... But what if we were not only allowed but encouraged to love the earth?”⁴⁰ While McFague speaks in broad generalizations about the Christian tradition’s disparaging of the earth, her doing so helps us perceive the significance of Starr King’s departure from this practice. His sermons implore his listeners to love the earth. “By love of nature...we enter into fellowship with the Creative art.” And again, “the inmost harmony with the Infinite we find only through love.”⁴¹ He urges us to meditate on the beauty of nature with adoration and reverence. Embracing the natural world as an expression of God’s love and encouraging humankind to love God’s

creation elevates the natural world from a tool for production to a shrine for experiencing the holy. It does not entirely escape the problem of conceptualizing nature's purpose as serving humankind. It does, however, provide a moral obligation to protect and preserve God's temple. It also proclaims God's creation as good, worthy of our love and of God's. It gives the natural world inherent value. From this understanding sprung Starr King's desire to preserve and protect vast tracts of the Sierra Nevada from human destruction. His most successful efforts were in pressing Congress to protect Yosemite Valley from homesteading and logging. How were these threads picked up in later years and by whom? As California developed greater means of protecting the natural world, how did religious communities contribute to the worldview among its citizens that would make it possible, indeed desirable to do so? The answers to these questions are beyond the scope of this paper, and they point to future areas for research.

In "Living Waters from Lake Tahoe" Starr King makes another surprising move that opens more possibilities. Starr King's notion of God departs from the views commonly held in his time when he declares that the "Infinite mind and art rejoices in the glory of his creations." As noted above, this notion instills the natural world with intrinsic value, but more than that, it places Starr King in the stream of what Charles Hartshorne calls neoclassical theism or process thought.⁴² If God "delights in his works" and if those works continue to change, as nature most certainly will, God changes too. As Hartshorne posits, "Either God lacks any aesthetic sense and then we surpass God in that respect, or there is no upper limit to the divine enjoyment of the beauty of the world." Moreover, "An absolute maxim of beauty is a meaningless idea."⁴³ Because creativity and beauty are endless, God and God's creation, including humankind, together create and

experience novelty. As God experiences this novelty, God is changed. This is the essence of the process theologians assertion that the possibilities for God and for humankind are open, endless, and yet to be revealed, not only to humankind but also to God. Therefore, the capacity for God to change as creation changes is endless.

This understanding of God has significant implications for ethical action. As Hartshorne explains, “to ‘serve God’ is to make one’s contribution to the beauty of the world as spectacle for God’s enjoyment.”⁴⁴ Or put another way, “To be ethical is to seek aesthetic optimization of experience for the community.”⁴⁵ To destroy or cause violence to God’s home would cause God to suffer. In this view, clear cutting, open pit mining, pollution, and careless suburban sprawl are ugly. War, slavery, genocide, poverty, and all the “isms” are ugly. The God Starr King speaks of takes the greatest possible interest in all of God’s creation. It follows that if God has joy in God’s creation, then God can also suffer with it. While it is “our sovereign privilege that we are called to the possibility of sympathy with his joy” as well as his suffering, none has the vantage point of God. To the best of our finite abilities, ethical action must consider the state of the entirety of God’s creation, all of God’s home.

This theological shift also has implications for right relationship among all of God’s creatures. Starr King writes, “The universe is the home of God. He has lined its walls with beauty. He has invited us into his palace.” As guests rather than dominators, as beings called to contribute to the beauty of the world for God’s enjoyment, humans enter into community with all creatures and non-human beings. Kathryn Tanner explains that when human and non-human beings are considered in the same circle of moral concern “the same care and concern that are owed human beings as God’s creatures are owed also

to nonhuman ones. Here, then, is a vision of cosmic justice in which all beings are due equal consideration at some basic level of moral concern.”⁴⁶ While it would be unlikely that Starr King would include the non-human aspects of creation to this extent in his understanding of moral action, it is remarkable that he planted the seeds for such a possibility. His view of humankind’s place in the cosmos begins to give us the possibility of a moral vision enabling choices about human action toward a loving, just, sustainable, and beautiful future for the whole community, human and non-human, of Planet Earth.

When Starr King uses dynamic imagery for nature’s processes and even the perception of the lake being conscious, he intuits something that was out of the reach of science in his time, but has become significant to process thought in ours. Post-Newtonian physics has shifted our understanding of matter from inert atoms to constantly changing events. The mountains, Starr King says, “are not dead mounds of matter.” While Starr King believes all the dynamic processes of nature to be a force of God’s will, process theology makes sense of these scientific insights in a world without an omnipotent, omniscient God. Rather, each moment is a process of being/becoming which God receives but cannot foresee. In the process view, Rebecca Parker writes, “We understand ourselves to be part of a plenitude of being, all of which is endowed with creativity and subjectivity, each part of which is intimately connected to, influenced by, and influencing all others.”⁴⁷ The starting place for ethical action, then, is this awareness of the complete interconnection of all existence.

I do not want to suggest that Starr King deliberately made a move to topple the hierarchy of beings that place humankind on top, nor was he intentionally professing a God changed by the unfolding of God’s creation. Starr King himself writes, “Where we

discern beauty and yet seclusion, loveliness *and yet no human use*, we can follow up the created charm to the mind of the Creator, and think of it as realizing a conception or a dream by him”⁴⁸(emphasis mine). He cannot quite set aside the primary purpose of nature as use by humankind. Moreover, he clearly maintains a hierarchy of humankind that privileges men educated in a European American tradition over all others. In his sermon he wonders if men looked upon Lake Tahoe when Jesus walked near Lake Gennesareth. He wonders “were they above a savage level, and could they appreciate its beauty?” Later he states there are places on the shore of Lake Tahoe “to which not more than a few score intelligent visitors have yet been introduced.”⁴⁹ Even while most credit his choice of sermon title with solidifying the name “Lake Tahoe” from the Indian language of the region rather than “Lake Bigler” chosen by California’s legislature, he still dehumanizes the region’s earliest inhabitants. By dwelling on the possibilities inherent in the understanding of God and humankind that Starr King’s sermons profess, I do not mean to suggest he fully realized them in his own attitudes. Nevertheless, I do want to draw attention to his convictions that have significant implications for the way humans are related to the community of earth.

Were the threads cast by Thomas Starr King picked up by later preachers or religious scholars in California? Did they have influence among the early environmentalists on the West Coast? While these questions are beyond the scope of the current paper, they point to future areas of inquiry. Also outside the scope of this paper but equally interesting is the question of how Starr King’s understanding of God’s relationship to God’s creation impacted his ethical views in the multi-racial, multi-cultural human community of San Francisco in the antebellum era. Did God’s love and

grace, revealed in the beauty of nature, fall equally on the whole human community, creating a broad and inclusive circle of moral concern?

Today efforts are underway to correct serious threats to Lake Tahoe's future viability and beauty that were caused by the impact of human-made pollution and disruption to its delicate ecosystem. The Sierra Nevada still house vast tracts of wilderness and yet much of the mountains' ecosystems are negatively impacted by human carelessness, pollution, and greed. I cannot help but wonder how the tarnished lake and mountain range would change Starr King's sermons. Mt. Starr King stands a towering 9,181 feet, not far from the Yosemite Valley, as a reminder of the great man whom Charles Wendte called the "Eulogist of California Scenery." Wendte was speaking of "eulogy" as an offering of the highest praise. In our time, the words are haunting because they intimate a memorial service, and we can perceive the possible death of many of our great ecosystems here in California. As Unitarian Universalists reach into our histories to discover the theologies and ethical visions upon which we can build an ecologically sound theology and ethics for our time, we stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us. Starr King offers us a fruitful starting place as we do our part to turn the course of human history so that the entire community of human and non-human beings, connected in a common circle of moral concern, might hear not a death knell but "the harmonies of natural beauty run far up into the chords of cheer and joy."

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- ¹ Arnold Crompton, *Unitarianism on the Pacific Coast: The First 60 Years* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), pp. 21-30.
- ² Charles Wendte, *Thomas Starr King: Patriot and Preacher* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1921), pp. 120-149.
- ³ See Wendte *Thomas Starr King: Patriot and Preacher* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1921); Arnold Crompton, *Apostle of Liberty: Starr King in California* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950); Robert A. Monzingo, *Thomas Starr King: Eminent Californian, Civil War Statesman, Unitarian Minister* (Ocean View, California: Boxwood Press, 1991).
- ⁴ His famous book, *The White Hills: Their Legends, Landscape, and Poetry* (Boston: Crosby and Nichols, 1864) is a detailed nature guide. Wendte notes that his descriptions of California scenery to the *Boston Evening Transcript* are “the hastily recorded impressions of a vacation tourist,” p. 148.
- ⁵ Wendte, p. 86.
- ⁶ “Summary of Gold Mining in US,”
http://www.tchistory.org/TCHISTORY/more_gold.htm, retrieved on 11/13/09.
- ⁷ For a succinct history see “The West – Events from 1850 to 1860”
http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/events/1850_1860.htm, retrieved on 11/13/09.
- ⁸ He writes to his friend and denominational official Dr. Bellows, “I have just finished the reading of the cubic yard or so of documents from San Francisco, which you have sent to me. They are very clear and strong, and I must acknowledge that they impress me seriously. I do desire to be in a position where my labor would be of greater worth to the general cause than it can be in Boston,” in Arnold Crompton, *Apostle of Liberty: Starr King in California* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1950), p. 21.
- ⁹ For a description of “Turbulent California in Mid-Century” see Crompton, pp. 3-18.
- ¹⁰ Wendte., p. 223.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 188.
- ¹² Ibid., p. 120
- ¹³ Jeffrey P. Schaffer, *Yosemite National Park: A Natural History Guide to Yosemite and its Trails* (Berkeley, California: Wilderness Press, 1999), p. 48.
- ¹⁴ Crompton, *Unitarianism on the Pacific Coast: The First 60 Years*, pp. 55-56.
- ¹⁵ Wendte, p. 70.
- ¹⁶ These summary statements are a synthesis arrived at by consulting the following sources: Charles Reynolds Brown, *Our Total Christianity* (Oakland, CA: Wood & Cowdrey Publishers, 1910); E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985); and David B. Parke, ed. *The Epic of Unitarianism: Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1985).
- ¹⁷ Crompton, *Unitarianism on the Pacific Coast: The First 60 Years*, pp. 55-56.
- ¹⁸ Edwin Whipple, ed., *Christianity and Humanity: A Series of Sermons by Thomas Starr King* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, and Company, 1880), p. 308.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 310.
- ²⁰ Ibid., pp. 308-309.

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- ²¹ Ibid., pp 309-310.
- ²² Ibid., p. 286.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 287.
- ²⁴ Ibid., p. 291.
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