

God, Nature and Politics: The Ministry of Thomas Starr King

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Thomas Starr King spent four short years in California. In that time he exercised a major influence upon the politics and moral culture of the new west. He traveled the pacific region, lecturing and fundraising, and wrote startlingly beautiful descriptions of the spectacular new land he saw, while simultaneously growing a strong, healthy church in San Francisco. That this slightly built man should cast such a long shadow hints that there was more to him than mere facts. He was certainly exceptional. By studying the facts of his life, and reading his words, we can, perhaps, build a picture of the man and find the source of his tremendous power to inspire people and institutions.

As a prosperous, privileged denomination that struggles to walk our talk about social justice issues, we could benefit by knowing just how his theology influenced his sense of patriotism. In our striving to protect our planet from our own consumption and waste, we could benefit by finding the reverence in his descriptions of nature. As ministers, we could benefit by wondering if he could have taken better care of himself, survived a few more years, lived a longer and more moderate life, and had even more influence over time.

Thomas Starr King was born in New York City on December 17th, 1824. His father, the Rev. Thomas Farrington King, was a Universalist minister. As yjr Rev. King was called, so the family moved, from Hudson, New York to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and finally to Charlestown, Massachusetts

in 1835. Young Thomas was educated at the excellent public schools in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, where he excelled. Since there was no high school in Charlestown, he was tutored by the grammar school principal in preparation for college. He was a brilliant student, and his sense of humor and gentle disposition made him a favorite of his teachers. He was clearly suited to follow in his father's footsteps as a minister. By the age of thirteen he had written a sermon that was published in a denominational paper. But the long illness and early death of his father put an end to his college ambitions. At fifteen, he went to work as a clerk and bookkeeper to support his mother and five siblings. Although working in the business world, he kept himself engaged in study. He formed a club with other young men for serious reading and discussion. He read widely and voraciously, and attended lecture courses and took copious notes. Eventually, he left the mercantile arena to become a schoolteacher. In 1842, at the age of eighteen, he became the principal of a grammar school in Medford. Not only did he find a career more suited to his nature, and providing more income, he also became acquainted with Medford's Universalist pastor, Hosea Ballou II, who he later referred to as his "theological father".

In 1843 he went to work as a bookkeeper in the Charlestown Navy Yard, another boost for his income, and more leisure time to study. Fluent in six languages, he read philosophy and poetry in their original tongues, discussing them at length with friends. He wrote to his friend Randolph Ryer, long letters on the philosophers he was grappling with. In one such letter, in September 1844, he writes about the connection between faith and reason: "Reason, instead of being subordinated to faith is the very essence of faith, else faith is a blind idolatry."... "You desire the social manifestation of Christianity as the means of raising the individual."... "I look rather to the elevation of the individual as one great means of improving society."

Given his own gifts, and the atmosphere in which he grew up, it is not surprising that he would choose ministry as a profession. He had access to some of the great minds of liberal Christianity; William Ellery Channing, Ballou, Theodore Parker, and his father's successor, Dr. E. A. Chapin. Both Parker and Chapin recommended him to various pulpits in the Boston area, and he began preaching at the age of twenty. When Chapin was called to a church in New York, Charlestown called Thomas Starr King, and he became their minister at the age of twenty-two. It was difficult matter to assume his father's pulpit, but he was successful for a while. After two years his health was at risk, and he took a sea voyage to rest and restore himself. On his return he accepted a call to the Hollis Street Unitarian Church in Boston. In explaining the change of denomination to his friends he coined the now famous joke: "The one thinks God is too good to damn them forever, the other thinks they are too good to be damned forever."

Hollis Street was a difficult church, divided by the controversy surrounding slavery. Although King had strong views on this and other subjects, he also had patience, and he managed to keep the congregation together and grow it over the next eleven years. As he began his ministry at Hollis Street, he also began his marriage to Julia Wiggin. Julia was bright, attractive and gracious, and their home became a social center, hosting the eminent thinkers and writers of the day. He began the formation of “a large club to consist of free minds of all complexions and tendencies. Emerson, W.H. Channing, E.P. Whipple, John Weiss, John S. Dwight, James Freeman Clarke, etc. are deeply interested...”

Unfortunately, Hollis Street could only afford to pay \$3,000 per year, of which \$1,000 went to support his mother and an ill brother. In order to make ends meet, King took to the lecture circuit. His principal subjects were “Goethe,” “Socrates”, and “Substance and Show.” The Lyceum was widely popular and well attended, being as it was the television and internet of the time, offering intellectual discussion as entertainment. King’s warm and open style made him a popular lecturer, much in demand. He was able to supplement his income but at a high cost to his health. He formed the habit of vacationing in the White Hills of New Hampshire. The rare beauty of that then unknown region was restorative for King, and he returned the favor with a book to entice the New England city dwellers back to nature. *The White Hills, Their Legends, Landscape and Poetry*” was published in 1859.

After 11 years as Parish Minister and Lyceum Lecturer, Thomas Starr King was exhausted. The necessity to lecture for income was draining his energies and taxing his frail health. Bellows was writing to him with offers from other churches, including Chicago, Cincinnati, Buffalo, and San Francisco. Thinking that he could make a name for himself out west, away from the intellectual snobbery of Boston, King chose the San Francisco call. He wrote to Bellows: “ I do think we are unfaithful in huddling so closely to the cozy stove of civilization in this blessed Boston, and I, for one, am ready to go into the cold and see if I am good for anything.” In April of 1860 Thomas, Julia, and their 8-year-old daughter Edith set sail for California.

After an adventure of a journey the Kings arrived in San Francisco on Saturday the 28th of April. The church had been closed for repairs, and they assumed he would be too tired to preach the next day. Typically, he talked them into placing an announcement in the *Daily Alta California*, and preached to a packed house.

By 1860 San Francisco was a full-fledged commercial center, attracting men who made their living in the arts and professions. There were, in proportion to its population, more doctors than in any other city on earth. These educated professionals were well suited to the rational, humane brand of

religion offered by the Unitarian Church. King soon settled into his ministry and set about retiring the \$20,000 debt the congregation had accumulated. He wrote in his journal: "The flowers in the fields are wonderful in their mass, color and variety. That is all that has impressed me favorably as yet. The city is very queer, and very uninteresting to Eastern eyes. It is a vast struggle of houses over half a dozen sand hills, and the streets are bilious with Chinamen." This little shock of racism is somewhat countered by this discovery: "A California stage is the most democratic institution on the globe. Mongolian and Ethiopian, Lascar and Kanaka, Jew and Gentile, lordly owner of a gold-lead mine, and humblest worker in it, are treated with the sun's impartiality. They are simply ticket holders, and first come, best served."

The Kings found their new home in what Edith called "Sand Francisco," a very mixed bag; in some ways primitive and unattractive, in others full of beauty and promise for the future. In his travels around California, Oregon Washington and Nevada, King found ample beauty, in a style he had never seen before. Among the great many letters that Starr King wrote to the Boston Evening Transcript, his description of an expedition to Mount Diablo was a travelogue of the north and east bay areas in their 1860s pristine form. From the boat trip to the hike up to the summit, he delights in the rocks, grasses, and wildflowers of the mountain, and sings the praises of the view from the top, pausing with each compass point to bless the mountains valleys and waters of Northern California. "It seems to me that the word green was never understood until I looked down into the valleys of Pacheco, and Amador, and San Ramon"... "Miles and miles of slope and plain were alive with such tints as break through the foam of a clean sea-wave, when it combs upon a shelving rocky shore." King's travels in Yosemite Valley called forth superlatives and comparisons galore, as the tourist minister struggled to encompass the huge, rocky beauty of Yosemite with mere words. "The Ninth Symphony is the Yosemite of music." "A more majestic object than this rock I expect never to see on this planet. Great is granite, and the Yosemite is its prophet!" His travel throughout the west brought forth similar accounts, that of a surprised and delighted tourist, celebrating the awe and beauty of creation. In his sermon, "Living Water From Lake Tahoe," he begins by comparing the mountains to other mountains in Europe, finding them inferior to these Sierra peaks. He finds superlatives for the height of the mountains, the depths of the valley, the trees, the air, the colors of the water, every aspect of the region that he travels is given its own special moment of praise. "It is not, that we know, a well-spring to supply any large district with water for ordinary use. It seems to exist for beauty."... "Brethren, this question of color in nature, broadly studied, leads us quickly to contemplate and adore the love of 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. God hides his power and veils his awfulness in opulent beauty"... "God chooses the awful things to show off his tenderness." ... "we are called to the possibility of sympathy with his joy." King's theology of nature celebrates all of creation as the gift of a loving God.

With his mastery of philosophy and theology, his love of learning and debate, and a belief in a loving and benevolent God, Thomas Starr King moved into a California that was growing into trouble. The political situation was unstable, and leaning toward the south. A great many of those who came to California with the gold rush were from southern states, and brought their politics with them. The state government was controlled by the democrats, who were divided into two groups; those who felt slavery should be a matter of property rights, and those who felt it should be up to states to decide whether they would be slave or free states. There was also a movement to raise the bear flag and declare an independent Pacific Republic. In the presidential election, Lincoln was supported by only seven of fifty-three newspapers. Starr King pitched in and argued against slavery, for the Union, and for the Republican Party, including Abraham Lincoln for President, and Leland Stanford for Governor. Throughout his ministry in California, King used his considerable oratory skills to argue the cause of freedom as he saw it. When the south was arguing for peace at the cost of capitulation, he argued for war. In the few places in California where his name is known (outside of Unitarian Universalist Churches), he is known for “saving California to the Union.” He spoke up and down the coast, and at every mining camp wide spot in the road that would have him. For example, in response to the secessionists complaint that all they wanted was “to be let alone,” he said, “According to the old story of the captain and mate who owned a vessel and quarreled about how to fit her out of the harbor, the mate walks up and says, ‘Captain, I have anchored my half of the ship: you may do what you like with yours. Don’t coerce me into changing my mind. All I ask is to be let alone.’” King traveled the state using his command of language and his deep seated patriotism to argue against slavery. He lectured constantly, in addition to his extensive preaching and education duties with the congregation. He traveled the state, heedless of his own discomfort, and lectured on “Webster and the Constitution,” “Washington and the Union,” “Lexington and the New Struggle for Liberty,” “The Great Uprising,” and “The New Nation to Issue from the War.” His eloquence and passion filled halls wherever he went. He took a break from lecturing in 1862. “There is a great flood in the interior. California is a lake. Rats, squirrels, locusts, lecturers and other pests are drowned out.” Although King’s humor was part of his beloved preaching style, as the war raged on his humor turned dark, as in this example, about an Oregonian who would not fight to save the country unless he could be shown that his own personal interests were involved. “For one wild moment, I longed to throttle the wretch and push him into the Columbia. I looked down, however, and saw that the water was clean.”

One aspect of the war that captured King’s attention was the horrible conditions in Army camps and hospitals. The government was completely unprepared to care for the sick and wounded, lacking beds, medicines, and competent medical staff. To meet this need the United States Sanitary Commission was founded by the Rev. Henry Whitney Bellows. The most difficult mission of the Sanitary Commission was raising the money it needed to operate. In California, the money was raised by Thomas Starr King. Overall, he raised \$1,235,000, about 25 percent of the total raised nationwide.

This was accomplished while California was suffering natural disasters. In 1862 the aforementioned flood caused over 50 million dollars worth of damage to the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. In 1863 a drought destroyed the wheat crop and made hay scarce and expensive, resulting in slow business and widespread unemployment. Still, California responded to the passionate pleas of the small but mighty Starr King.

Meanwhile, Starr King had a growing congregation, and they needed a new church. The cost, including land and a new organ, was estimated at \$72,000. So he began another series of lectures to raise money for the new church. He enlisted the help of prominent American poets, each of whom sent him original work to read at the end of the lecture devoted to them. Typically it was a great success, but it took a toll on the preacher. The new church was built, and dedicated on Sunday January 10th, 1864. It cost \$90,000, of which \$5,000 was supplied by Thomas Starr King from the exhausting lectures. Meanwhile, \$200,000 was raised for the Sanitary Commission.

King wrote: “The new church completed and paid for, I shall be ready to drop into my grave.” Indeed, he began to think about rest. He hoped to travel to South America and study for a year in Germany. He wanted to write a book on the Sierras, and another on Philosophy. But among the continuing demands of ministry and political fund raising he took no rest. He contracted diphtheria, which led to pneumonia, which took his life on the fourth of March, 1864. He was 39. Richard Frothingham wondered about how Starr King grew into his ministry in California: “He was not considered as profoundly learned; he was not regarded as a remarkable orator; he was not a great writer; nor can his unrivaled popularity be ascribed to his fascinating social or intellectual gifts . . . it was the hidden interior man of the heart.”

It is probable that his true intellectual achievements were discounted by the Boston Brahmin, since he hadn't the academic degrees. It is likely that his Universalist theology, his ability to find evidence of God's grace everywhere in humanity and in nature, and his sense of justice as the work of everyone, drove him to his accomplishments as well as his early death. Like other short-lived heroic figures, his light burned briefly but very brightly. He continues to inspire Californians and Unitarian Universalists.

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Notes

1. Wendte, Charles W. *Thomas Starr King: Patriot and Preacher*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1921. 10.
2. *ibid.* 15.
3. *ibid.* 18.
4. *ibid.* 22.
5. *ibid.* 69.
6. *ibid.* 85.
7. Monzingo, Robert. *Thomas Starr King: Eminent Californian, Civil War Statesman, Unitarian Minister*. Pacific Grove: Boxwood Press, 1991. 24.
8. Wendte, Charles W. *Thomas Starr King: Patriot and Preacher*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1921. 130.
9. *ibid.* 144–145.
10. King, Thomas Starr. “Living Water From Lake Tahoe” in *Christianity and Humanity: A Series of Sermons*. Ed. Edwin P. Whipple. Boston: James R. Osgood & Co. 1877.
11. Monzingo, Robert. *Thomas Starr King: Eminent Californian, Civil War Statesman, Unitarian Minister*. Pacific Grove: Boxwood Press, 1991. 96.
12. Simonds, William Day. *Starr King In California*. San Francisco: Paul Elder and Company, 1917. 81–2.
13. *ibid.* 60.
14. Wendte, Charles W. *Thomas Starr King: Patriot and Preacher*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1921. 208.
15. Monzingo, Robert. *Thomas Starr King: Eminent Californian, Civil War Statesman, Unitarian Minister*. Pacific Grove: Boxwood Press, 1991. 228.

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