

# Nature Writings: Words of the Rev. Thomas Starr King

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Imagine a frail young man, not yet 40, shorter than I am, and weighing less. He has wide set eyes, lank blond hair and a passion for justice. Hear in your mind a deep, resonant voice that, unamplified, can move a crowd of 5,000 people to patriotic duty and instill in an individual a lifetime of love and respect for him. That is the Reverend Thomas Starr King.

Starr King lived in the mid-19th century, and his words reflect the language of his day and the theology of many Unitarians and Universalists at that time. After this presentation, for those who are interested, I can talk briefly about his life, and answer questions.

The Rev. Thomas Starr King, both a Universalist and a Unitarian, was minister of the San Francisco Unitarian Society from 1860 to 1864. A pastor, patriot, humanitarian, educator, orator, writer, man of letters, journalist, fighter for justice, shaper of public opinion, and lover of nature, he is best known for his role in keeping California in the Union during the Civil War. His book, "The White Hills, Their Legends, Landscape and Poetry," his sermons and his correspondence in newspapers such as the Boston Evening Transcript, brought his love of nature to the attention of the American public. He was widely known and respected, and much beloved. When Starr King School for the Ministry changed to its present name in 1941, almost 80 years after his death, the trustees chose the name, they said, because it would be widely recognized as Unitarian.

Kevin Starr, the California state historian, and a distant relative, wrote:

He... came to stand in the minds of Californians  
as the very symbol of religion, culture,  
and the greater scene beyond the Far West.

San Franciscans were proud of King's eloquence, his ties with literary Boston,  
his line of ministerial descent in the church of Emerson, Edward Everett,  
William Ellery Channing, and Theodore Parker.

The very fact that King seemed to be thriving in California  
was a comforting sign of provincial maturity.

That he was self-educated,  
that he has risen in the learned Unitarian ministry  
without benefit of an earned degree, reinforced the assumption  
that talent, not birth or background, was what counted.

In four short years King became California's man for all seasons, a hero and Prophet of the  
Pacific commonwealth.<sup>11</sup>

Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream 1850-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 100.

<sup>i</sup>Few people in New England in the mid-19th century had the concept of appreciating the natural world for its beauty or even for its recreational value. Some exceptions were Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Thomas Starr King.

Emerson began his famous Harvard Divinity School Address:

In the refulgent summer, it has been a luxury to draw the breath of life. The grass grows, the buds burst, the meadow is spotted  
with fire and gold in the tint of flowers.  
The air is full of birds, and sweet with the breath of the pine,  
the balm-of-Gilead, and the new hay...<sup>2</sup>

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "The Divinity School Address" delivered before the Senior Class at the Harvard Divinity School, Cambridge on July 15, 1838. Quoted in *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism, Channing-Emerson-Parker*, compiled by the Unitarian Universalist Association (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986) 90.

Thoreau's *Walden* spoke of the pleasures of a simple life and of carefully observing nature. In his review of *Walden* for the *Christian Register*, King wrote:

A young man, eight years out of college, of fine scholarship and original genius, revives, in the midst of our bustling times, the life of an anchorite. [A person who has retired into seclusion for religious reasons.] By the side of a secluded pond in Concord, he builds with his own hands a hut which cost him twenty-eight dollars and twelve and a half cents; and there he lived two and a half years, "cultivating poverty," because he "wanted to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and suck out all its marrow."

Here he found that the labor of six weeks would support him through the year; and so he had long quiet days for reading, observation, and reflection, learning to free himself from all the hollow customs and false shows of the world, and to pity those who by slavery to inherited property seemed to be doing incredible and astonishing penance. In the account he gives us of his clothes, house, food, and furniture, we find mingled many acute and wise criticisms upon modern life; while in his descriptions of all living things around him, birds, fishes, squirrels, mice, insects, trees, flowers, weeds, it is evident that he had the sharpest eye and the quickest sympathy.

One remarkable chapter is given to the sounds that came to his ear, with suggestions, full of poetry and beauty, of the feelings which these sounds awakened. But nothing interested him so much as the Pond, whose name gives the title to his book. He describes it as a clear sheet of water, about a mile in circumference; he bathed in it every morning; its cool crystal depths were his well, ready dug; he sailed upon its bosom in summer, he noted many curious facts pertaining to its ice in winter; in short, it became to him a living thing, and he almost worshiped it. But we must not describe the contents of this book any farther. Its opening pages may seem a little caustic and cynical; but it mellows apace,

and playful humor and sparkling thought appear on almost every page....  
Rarely have we enjoyed a book more,  
or been more grateful for many and rich suggestions...

As we shut the book up, we ask ourselves,  
will the great lesson it teaches of the freedom and beauty  
of a simple life be heeded? Shall this struggle for wealth,  
and this bondage to the impedimenta of life, continue forever?  
Will the time ever come when it will be fashionable to be poor, that is, when men will be so  
smitten with a purpose to seek the true ends of life that they will not care about laying up  
riches on the earth?

Such times we know there have been,  
and thousands listened reverently to the reply,  
given in the last of these two lines,  
to the inquiry contained in the first;  
“O where is peace, for thou its path hast trod?”  
“In poverty, retirement, and with God.”

Who can say that it is impossible that such a time may come round,  
although the fashion of this world now runs with such a resistless current in the opposite  
direction.<sup>33</sup>

[T. Starr King,] “New Publications,” *Christian Register* [Boston], 26 August 1854,  
p. 135, cols. 5-6.

Starr King’s book, “The White Hills, Their Legends, Poetry and Landscape,” came out a few years  
later. His colleague, Richard Frothingham, called it “the most elaborate attempt to picture to the  
mind’s eye the grandeur and beauty of natural scenery which has graced our native  
literature.”<sup>44</sup> Richard Frothingham, *A Tribute to Thomas Starr King*, (Boston: Ticknor and Fields,  
1865) 147.

It was much more widely read at the time, and thus much more influential, than “Walden.” When  
King was in New England he traveled to the White Hills of New Hampshire to rest from the pres-  
sures his parish work, social outreach and his orations. He wrote *The White Hills* so that hikers  
could carry a guide book, background information on local legends and appropriate poetry all in one  
volume. It was one of the first attempts to entice the city dweller “back to nature.”

In it King stated:

A visit to New Hampshire supplies the most resources to a traveler,  
and confers the most benefit on the mind and taste,  
when it lifts him above mere appetite for wildness, ruggedness,  
and the feeling of mass and precipitous elevation, into a perception  
and love of the refined grandeur, the chaste sublimity, the airy majesty  
overlaid with tender and polished bloom,  
in which the landscape splendor of a noble mountain lies....Every triumph of a human artist  
is only an illusion,  
producing a semblance of a real charm of air or foliage,  
of sunset cloud, or dewy grass, or mountain splendor,  
which Nature offers.  
If a man could own all the landscape canvasses which  
the first painters of the world have colored,  
it would not be a tithe so rich an endowment,  
as if Providence should quicken his eye  
with keener sensibility to the hues of the west at evening, the grace of trees and the pomp of  
piled or drifting clouds.<sup>55</sup>

Thomas Starr King, *The White Hills: their Legends, Landscape, and Poetry*, (Boston: Crosby & Nichols & Co., 1859), 6-8.

When Starr King came to San Francisco in 1860, he was immediately impressed with the beauty of the surrounding countryside (but not the city). He wrote to the children in his former church in Boston:

You cannot imagine, children, how splendid the flowers are here.  
Three weeks ago, before the leaves had come out on the trees in Boston,  
the whole country was brilliant with the brightest colors of wild flowers. Mountains that had  
no trees on them were carpeted with blue, and yellow, and violet, and splendid banks of  
orange- colored poppies. It was a glorious sight to see acres and acres of such beauty  
without a stone, or fence, or tree to mar the spectacle.-  
And all over the country now, the roses are in full bloom,  
and will be until next December.  
Strawberries are very plentiful and very large,  
and they will be in market until November.  
It is a wonderful land.  
San Francisco is not handsome, not very pleasant,  
but all around it the climate is fine, and the loveliness very charming....

<sup>66</sup> Thomas Starr King, to the Sunday School Scholars and Teachers of Hollis Street Society, Boston, Massachusetts, May 25, 1860. Thomas Starr King special collection, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.

King not only appreciated beauty, he helped the children and the adults in Boston, San Francisco and throughout the Union to see natural beauty. The compiler and publisher of his sermons and orations, Edwin P. Whipple, wrote “The beauty in nature [was] linked in his mind with the beautiful in thought, in character, and in action.”<sup>77</sup> Edwin P. Whipple, forward to King, *Christianity and Humanity: A Series of Sermons by Thomas Starr King*, (Boston: James R. Osgood & Co., 1877), xxvii.

King asked his congregation, “What would a soul be with no pure delight in the beauty of the world?”<sup>88</sup> King, “Christian Thought of Future Life” in *Christianity and Humanity*, 58.

On Sunday mornings at the First Unitarian Society of San Francisco, King preached to a thousand people. There were somewhat fewer at the Sunday evening service. The local newspapers, such as the *Alta California*, often printed his sermons or excerpts from them. His faith, his environmentalism, his patriotism and his politics were not separate. They were combined and expressed from the pulpit as he endeavored to shape the opinions and actions of all those who heard him. He told his parishioners:

We are not to live outside the world, but in it,  
feeling its passions, working in its interests,  
striving to do our duty in its trials.

And yet large districts of our life and feeling should be above the world,  
on the Sierra heights from which the world and our toil  
and our home cares and our surroundings look noble, precious,  
bathed in light....

If thou dost catch at times some gleams of the divisings of charity,  
of the glory of sacrifice, of the grandeur of faith,  
of the sky-piercing power of prayer, like mountain-peaks  
jutting through fogs, or slopes afar off in the horizon light,  
believe in them with more enthusiasm  
than in the stupid dust of the beaten roads;  
make your home where they will inspire you,  
and where you can easily ascend their slopes,  
and see the world from a higher point,  
and feel the everlasting presence of God.

Believe in them, for they are the mountain-principles and alter-piles of life. Breathe the air that is freshened on their heights.

Drink of the streams that flow fresh from the channels in their sides.

And in every season of doubt, temptation, or despair,

lift up thine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh thy help.

99

King, "Lessons from the Sierra" in *Christianity and Humanity*, 302-303.

Delivered in 1863.

He preached on lessons from the drought of 1854:

For many weeks the land has been afflicted

(so it seems, at least, to our ignorance) by almost uninterrupted sunshine. From the Atlantic to the Mississippi

the sky has been hot, hard, and hollow over a parching soil.

The hillsides are blasted with fever. The grass has been scorched.

The fruits have shrunk.

The trees are withering with thirst,

and shedding shriveled leaves upon the burning winds.

The streams are dwindling;

brooks and ponds are drunk to their springs by the insatiable sun.

No "ribands of silver unwind from the hills."

The corn-harvest is smitten.

The glorious promise of the early summer,

pointing to full garners and cheap food,

has died into the arid landscape of waste and destitution.

Men have longed to see the beauty of clouds, but scarcely

any vapory spots have stained the heated helmet of the heavens;

they have prayed for the cold storm-winds from the northeast

to break the indigence of the sky,

and some days the south-west has opened sirocco-caves

and let loose airs that seemed outriders of earthquakes,

laden with sulphur and smoke.

It seems as though the earth was turning on its axis

to be roasted by the sun...

The physical government of God seems most impressive and admirable when we see that it is not rigid and mechanical,  
but easy, graceful, full of play,—the harmony of constant alternations.

1010  
King, “Lessons of the Drought” in *Christianity and Humanity*, 106-107.  
Delivered in 1854.

In an article in *California History*, Richard Peterson explained:

His extensive travels... enabled him to infuse his sermons  
with the beauty and diversity of nature,  
apparently filling his responsive congregation  
with a love of the outdoors as an expression of divine grace...

Although Californians would not relinquish their quest for growth and materialism in King’s day or in Muir’s, perhaps the energetic preacher from staid old Boston none the less lifted their popular consciousness,  
however temporarily, toward an appreciation  
of the God-given grandeur of the natural environment  
as a place not to be feared or ravaged, but revered.

1111  
Richard Peterson, “Thomas Starr King in California, 1860-64: Forgotten Naturalist of the Civil War Years” in *California History*, Spring, 1990, 18-19.

King used references to the natural world to explain his concept of God. In his sermon, “The Two Harvests” he said:

The harvest is past.  
Not a spear of wheat has grown, not a kernel of corn has hardened,  
not a beet has reddened in the ground,  
not an apple or a plum has nursed sweet juices  
through the tree out of the ground,  
that has not revealed or illustrated, in the process of its growth,  
a principle which ought to be carried out in nobler ways  
by human souls.  
Our dependence on God,  
our reception of his light and his spiritual rain,  
our fidelity to the duty of the circumstances in which we are set,  
our success in bending chilly days and gusts of adversity  
to usefulness in strengthening character,

ought to fulfil the lessons which every vine and every tree  
publish in their use of sunshine and soil and dew and storm...

1212  
King, "The Two Harvests" in *Humanity and Christianity*, 189.

In nature all is order.

There is no sinful planet;

there is no selfish or miserly sun;

there is no galaxy of wicked or discordant stars;

the winds are not rebellious;

the sea does not refuse service;

the clouds do not loiter on their errands;

the hills are not penurious;

the ground does not bar its bosom against the influence  
of sunbeams and rains.

God's law, God's holiness, God's charity,

are reflected in the loyalty and the purity and the fraternity

visible in all the facts and forces of the outward world.<sup>1313</sup> Ibid., 191.

In his 1863 sermon, "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada," perhaps his most famous sermon on the beauty of nature, he wrote:

Love of nature has its root in wonder and veneration,

and it issues in many forms of practical good.

There can be no abounding and ardent patriotism

where sacred attachment to the scenery of our civil home is wanting; and there can be no

abiding and inspiring religious joy in the heart

that recognizes no presence and touch of God

in the permanent surrounding of our earthly abode.

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.

Whatever leads us to such feelings towards the universe

puts us on the road to Christian faith, helps character,

and lifts the plane of the privilege of life.

I believe that if, on every Sunday morning before going to church,  
we could be lifted to a mountain-peak  
and see a horizon line of six hundred miles  
enfolding the copious splendor of the light on such a varied expanse;  
or if we could look upon a square mile of flowers  
representing all the species with which the Creative Spirit  
embroiders a zone;  
or if we could be made to realize the distance of the earth from the sun,  
the light of which travels every morning  
twelve millions of miles a minute to feed and bless us,  
and which the force of gravitation pervades without intermission  
to hold our globe calmly in its orbit and on its poise;  
if we could fairly perceive of the constant order and glory of nature,  
our materialistic dulness 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.

1414  
King, "Lessons from the Sierra Nevada" in *Christianity and Humanity*, 286-287. Delivered in 1863.

In "The Comet of 1861" he spoke of God and nature:

God created nature for himself as well as for us, for his own joy  
as well as for our existence and comfort and education....

God created the universe to express his thought,  
to realize what we may reverently call conceptions of genius,  
to reflect the deeps of his imagination,  
and so, by its marvels and order, to fill his own spirit with joy.

It is not necessary, therefore, that everything, or the majority of things,  
should serve what we call material uses.

If they serve artistic uses to the Creator of nature, they are sacred,—  
we should bend before them...

one of the great uses of comets, for the human race,  
Is to feed the sense of beauty, stir devout emotions,  
interpret the abysses of space,  
and educate the mind and soul in the uttered thoughts of God.

If they make us wonder more, muse more, adore more,  
think more solemnly and yet with solemn joy  
of the play of God's power in space,  
and the amplitude and punctuality of his providence,  
they make life nobler, the heart more tender, the soul wiser;  
they do us more good  
than if they simply dropped corn into our granary;  
they help to fit us for the work of the world to come.

1515  
King, "The Comet of July 1861," in *Humanity and Christianity*, 341-345.  
Delivered in 1861.

Starr King was best known in California for his orations, especially the patriotic ones, which attracted as many as 5,000 people. Whipple tells us that:

[King's] influence extended far beyond his parish and his denomination, and included that vast multitude of listeners who are more or less magnetically affected by the lyceum lecture. Indeed he was one of the foremost speakers who followed in the train of Ralph Waldo Emerson in erecting the lecture platform into a kind of free pulpit, from which the advanced ideas of spiritual thinker, philanthropist, and reformers were diffused through the community.

1616  
Edwin P. Whipple, introduction to *Substance and Show and other Lectures by Thomas Starr King* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., Riverside Press, Cambridge, Mass, Eighth Edition, 1890), [viii].

But he also repeated orations he had given in New England, such as "Socrates," "Substance and Show" and "Sight and Insight." These sometimes included references to the natural world. In "Sight and Insight" he explained to his audience:

The man is to be pitied who has no intellectual insight into truth of any district of nature, but it is a sadder thing to see a man on whom all bloom is wasted, who carries an eye that shaves the twinkle from every star, who disenchants the light,

and, wherever he moves, brushes the halo from nature.  
One of the vices of our American intellect in this age of mechanism  
is its essentially mechanical conception of nature,—  
as though the solar system runs by clockwork  
and the stars are whirled by bands, belts, and drums...  
Science is the prose and beauty the poetry of the visible world...  
The universe was created so as to serve the prophet's purpose,  
and be a sermon.

1717  
King, "Sight and Insight" in *Substance and Show*, 160-161, 185.

Starr King loved to be out in the wilderness. For a man in frail health, he did a lot of strenuous hiking. A few months after he came to California, he traveled to the Mariposa big trees and to Yosemite. In 1860 it was a several day journey from San Francisco to Yosemite by way of the big trees. King took the steamer to Stockton, the stagecoach to Coulterville, then rode by horseback to Mariposa to see the trees and then on to Inspiration Point and the Yosemite Valley. He rode the horse at full gallop, declaring that if he could not be a minister he would want to be a pony express rider.

King was in awe of the beauty and grandeur which he found there. He wrote to his friend:

July 13, 1860 to Sun. Eve.

Dear Randolph,

I have visited the Big Trees of Mariposa,  
and have descended into the jaws of the Yo-Semite.

Poor White Mountains Notch! Its nose is broken.

If you can find any copies of King's book

on the New Hampshire ant-hills, I advise you, as a friend of the author, to buy up the remain-  
ing edition and make a bond fire of these

in the park or give them to Vanderbilt's Allen

[steamship agent who made King's trip to California by boat difficult].

1818  
Thomas Starr King, San Francisco to Randolph Ryer, New York, July 13, 1860 to Sun.  
Eve., manuscript in Thomas Starr King special collection, Graduate Theological School,  
Berkeley.

Publication of King's letters of his journey in the Boston Evening Transcript (and photographic  
exhibitions of Yosemite Valley by Charles Weed and Carleton Watkins) "brought interest in Yosemite  
to new heights, despite the nation's preoccupation with the course of the Civil War..."<sup>1919</sup> Peter J.

Blodget, "Visiting 'The Riben of Wonder': Yosemite and the Business of Tourism, 1855-1916" in *California History*, Spring 1990, 119.

Those letters provided New England with a graphic description of what it was like to travel to Yosemite. They were later compiled into a book. <sup>2020</sup> See Thomas Starr King, *A Vacation among the Sierras: Yosemite in 1860*, edited and with an introduction and notes by John A. Hussey, San Francisco: The Book Club of California, 1962.

For example:

The afternoon hours we passed in the Mariposa grove  
were strangely short.

One needs a long summer day for the proper study  
even of half a dozen of the chief senators in the group.

What is an afternoon among six hundred?

I lay for half an hour alone at the root of the most colossal bole [sequoia]—my companions  
out of sight and hearing—

and watched the golden sunshine mounting the amber trunk,  
and at last leaving a hundred feet of it in shadow  
to flood its mighty boughs and locks with tender lustre.

What silence and what mystery!

How many centuries of summers has such evening splendor  
burnished thus the summit of the completed shaft?

How long since the quickening sunbeam  
fell upon the first spear of green

in which the prophecy of the superb obelisk was enfolded.

Why cannot the dumb column now be confidential?

There comes a breath of wind,

cooled by the snow on higher swells of the Sierras,  
which can be seen from the western edge of the grove;—

why will not the old patriarch take advantage of that ripple  
through his leaves and whisper to me his age?

Are you as old as Noah?

Do you span the centuries as far as Moses?

Can you remember the time of Solomon?

Were you planted before the seed of Rome took root in Italy?

At any rate, tell me whether or not your birth

belongs to the Christian centuries;

whether we must write "B.C." or "A.D." against your infancy.

I promised the stalwart greybeard that I would tell nobody,  
or at most, only the Transcript, if he would  
just drop into my ear the hour of his nativity.  
Perhaps he would have told me, if my party had not returned  
to disturb the conditions of a communication....

Dr. [John] Tory ...makes our tree about eleven hundred years old.  
If this calculation be trustworthy, the column at whose root I sat  
took its first draught of sunshine in the time of Charlemagne.  
It is three hundred years older than the Norman Conquest and the great Hildebrand.  
It was a giant in the time of the first Crusade.  
And it antedates the foundation stone of the oldest Gothic spire of Europe. A genial evening  
of life to the Methuselahs of the wilderness, who were babies of a century a  
thousand years ago.

“<sup>2121</sup> King, *A Vacation among the Sierras*, 35-36.

Yo-Semite...valley is of such irregular width, and bends so much and often so abruptly, that  
there is great variety and frequent surprise in the forms and combinations of the overhanging  
rocks, as one rides along the bank of the stream.

The patches of luxuriant meadow with their dazzling green,  
and the grouping of the superb firs, two hundred feet high,  
that skirt them, and that shoot above the stout and graceful oaks  
and sycamores, through which the horse path winds,  
are delightful rests of sweetness and beauty amid the threatening awfulness,—  
like the threads and flashes of melody  
that relieve the towering masses of Beethoven's harmony.

The ninth Symphony is the Yo-Semite of music...<sup>2222</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

The immense escarpment [El Capitan] has no crack or mark of stratification.  
There is no vegetation growing anywhere on it,  
for there is no patch of soil on either front,  
and no break where soil can lodge and a plant can grow.  
It is one block of naked granite, pushed up from below to give us a sample  
of the cellar-pavement of our California counties,  
and to show us what it is that our earthquakes joggle.  
But on one face the wall is weather stained, or lichen-stained  
with rich cream-colored patches; on the other face it is ashy grey.

A more majestic object than this rock  
I expect never to see on this planet.  
Great is granite, and the Yo-Semite is its prophet!<sup>2323</sup> Ibid., 49.

Leaving our horses about four miles from the hotel,  
in a charming grove, we climbed along the track of the Middle Fork, which is the main  
feeder of the noble Merced, for some five miles...

The first great reward in this Notch, after three miles or so of  
tramping and scrambling by the side of the raging stream,  
is the fall of Pi-wy-ack,  
abused by Yankees with the name of "Vernal,"  
and of which it is said the true Indian title means  
"Shower of Sparkling Crystals."

A tide sixty feet broad purrs here some three hundred feet over  
a perpendicular and crescent rampart that joins the two sides  
of the Notch... We climbed the face of the rock by ladders...  
stood by the fall, leaned over a natural parapet  
and watched for half an hour the sheet, sixty feet wide,  
falling three hundred feet without a tint of color on it,  
and seemingly with no fleck of foam.

It was a sheet not of "Sparkling Crystals,"  
begging the Indians' pardon, but of dead white pearls.<sup>2424</sup> Ibid., 62-63.

Tourists generally are content with the toil and the views  
that are gained when they reach the foot of the "Nevada."

[I] Climbed with one of our party above it,  
and on a mountain behind it, up and up,  
till we overtopped the obelisk that shoots from the side of the cataract.

And still up we climbed in the hope of seeing  
a line of the kingly summits of the Sierra chain.

My companion killed a rattlesnake that buzzed generously near our legs before making us  
acquainted with his fangs.

And dangling his seven rattles as a trophy,  
without fear of any others,  
we still mounted till we stood on a ridge  
that showed other obelisks of naked granite shooting up at the east, and very near us on the  
north, the great "Castle Peaks"

which stand guard over the Mono silver region,—  
themselves frosted with silver on their summits  
that are borne up nearly 14,000 feet above the sea.  
With this in mind, we hastened down to the base of the Nevada fall, then to the parapet of the  
beautiful Piwyack [Vernal Falls]  
where we rejoined our companions;  
then down the frightful ladders, and through the notch,  
to our horses in the larger gorge of the Yo-Semite;—  
and around our camp-fire in the evening, in front of the hotel,  
I, for one, believed what travelers from Europe, from Sinai,  
from the wildest passes of the Peruvian Andes, told us,  
while the music of the highest cataract was in our ears,—  
that nowhere had they seen such rocks and such waterfalls  
as those among which we had passed three glorious summer days.  
But I am sure our readers will be glad to see a party of five  
riding out of the Yo-Semite, and to know  
that one of them Thomas Starr King <sup>2525</sup> Ibid., 65.

King's lively narrative, which has been termed the "first really thorough description of an extended  
Yosemite trip" was, as were all his California letters, well received and widely read <sup>2626</sup> Hussey,  
introduction to *A Vacation among the Sierras*, xxi..

King's longtime friend, Henry Bellows, said shortly after the preacher's death, "You will find the  
newspapers in which his portraiture of these sublime and charming scenes are found, carefully laid  
away in hundreds of New England homes as permanent sources of delight." <sup>2727</sup> Ibid. Hussey  
quoted Bellows, *In Memory of Starr King*, p. 22.

Werner Hager tells us:

The first, accounts of the magnificence of Yosemite were not believed... By 1860, many felt  
the commercial interests including the lumber industry, would ruin Yosemite. At the sugges-  
tion of the influential Reverend Thomas Starr King and later Frederick Law Olmsted, Senator  
John Conness introduced a Park bill in the senate. It passed both houses of congress and on  
June 30, 1864 it was signed into law by Abraham Lincoln. Unfortunately, this park only  
included the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove. It would not be until 1890 under the  
pressure brought to bear by John Muir that Yosemite National park would be  
created. <sup>2828</sup> Werner W. Hager at tilly83@cruzio.com Last updated October 14, 1997. [http://  
www.cyberhikes.com/HYNPINFO.HTM](http://www.cyberhikes.com/HYNPINFO.HTM)

Jeffrey P. Schaffer states in “Yosemite National Park: A Natural History Guide to Yosemite and its Trails”:

With America locked in civil war, it is a wonder that anyone visited Yosemite. Still, some people did, and a few of these helped to get park status for Yosemite Valley. A highly influential Unitarian minister, Reverend Thomas Starr King, who had visited the Valley in 1860, saw the homesteading and commercial pursuits in it might be harmful, and he was the first — through his nationwide audience — to press for a public park.

<sup>2929</sup> Jeffrey P. Schaffer, *Yosemite National Park: A Natural History Guide to Yosemite and its Trails*, (Wildflower Press, 1999), 48.

According to the San Francisco newspaper, *Alta California*, King’s manuscript for a book on Yosemite was almost complete in early 1864 when he died. <sup>3030</sup> *Alta California*, March 5, 1864.

The newspaper said:

King’s early visit to Yosemite in 1860 and the letters he wrote about its scenic beauty helped the public to realize that “the treasures of Yosemite should be public property, not to be lavished upon a few for personal gain....Such was his fame and influence that these letters had a wide audience in the East with a substantial effect upon Yosemite’s destiny. <sup>3131</sup> Ibid.

Starr King was also greatly impressed by his visit to Lake Tahoe. In his sermon, “The Living Waters of Lake Tahoe” he described his trip this way:

To a wearied frame and tired mind what refreshment there is  
in the neighborhood of this lake!  
The air is singularly searching and strengthening.  
The noble pines, not obstructed by underbrush,  
enrich the slightest breeze with aroma and music.  
Grand peaks rise around,  
on which the eye can admire the sternness of everlasting crags  
and the equal permanence of delicate and feathery snow.  
Then there is a sense of seclusion from the haunts and cares of men,  
of being upheld on the immense billow of the Sierra,  
at an elevation near the line of perpetual snow,  
yet finding the air genial,  
and the loneliness clothed with the charm of feeling  
the sense of the mystery of the mountain heights,  
part of a chain that links the two polar seas,  
and of the mystery of the water poured into the granite bowl,  
whose rim is chased with the splendor of perpetual forms,

and whose bounty, flowing into the Truckee stream,  
finds no outlet into the ocean, but sinks again into the land.

<sup>3232</sup>King, *Christianity and Humanity*, 306.

This purity of nature is part of the revelation to us  
of the sanctity of God.

I read under the pines of Lake Tahoe, on that Sunday afternoon,  
some pages from a recent English work  
that raises the question of inspiration.

Is the Bible the word of God, or the words of men? It is neither.  
It is the word of God breathed through the words of men,  
inextricably intertwined with them  
as the tone of the wind with the quality of the tree.

We must go to the Bible as to a grove of evergreens,  
not asking for cold, clear truth, but for sacred influence,  
for revival to the devout sentiment,  
for the breath of the Holy Ghost, not as it wanders in pure space,  
but as it sweeps through the cedars and pines.  
No book is so deep, so rich, so tender, so awakening  
as the Bible after the freest criticism has been expended upon it.  
Nothing can take the tone out of it.

It will be as true, as deep, as uplifting,  
to the hearts of centuries to come, however cultured,  
as the voice of the pines will, in future ages,  
be the deepest natural music that the human ear can receive.<sup>3333</sup> *Ibid.*, 316-317.

Lake Tahoe was then called Lake Bigler, after California's third governor, who was a Southern sympathizer during the Civil War. King always referred to the lake by the Native American name, Lake Tahoe.

Starr King was a person of great influence and renown. His orations, sermons and other efforts to keep California in the Union and to raise money for humanitarian causes not only helped the Civil War effort, but also helped the pioneers and gold miners to look beyond their Western frontier "me-first" attitude to helping others.

In honor of Starr King, at his funeral flags on the land and in the harbor were flown at half mast, minute guns gave their salute out over the San Francisco Bay, the legislature and the courts adjourned, and 20,000 people swarmed in and around the church. Henry Bellows wired from New York:

The mountains he loved and praised  
are hence-forth his monument and his mourners.  
The White Hills and the Sierra Nevada

are to-day wrapped in his shroud.  
His dirge will be perpetually heard in their forests.

<sup>3434</sup>Charles W. Wendte, *Thomas Starr King: Patriot and Preacher* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1921), 219.

Flowery funeral orations and other accounts of his life and writings abound. Mountain peaks and schools were named in his honor. By 1890 his book of orations was in its eighth edition. His statue now stands in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park and in the Hall of Statuary in the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Today Rev. Thomas Starr King is largely forgotten but sorely needed. We need a Starr King who "wherever he perceived the false, he unscathingly exposed it; where he recognized the truth, there did he point the way."<sup>3535</sup> Emma Hardinge, *Funeral Oration delivered at Platt's Hall, San Francisco, March 10, 1864*, 11. Printed copy at the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley.

We need a Starr King to see the beauty in nature, and to articulate it and to remind us of our responsibilities to preserve it.

Rep. Christopher Cox, Republican congressman from nearby Newport Beach, has recently proposed that Thomas Starr King's statue in the National Statuary Hall in Washington, D.C., be removed from its place of honor as one of the two statues representing California, and be replaced with one of Ronald Reagan. If you were a member of the legislature, how would you vote?