

Courage and Commitment: Thomas Starr King

February 11, 2018

Rev Lucy Bunch

Last year my spouse Nancy and I went on a tourist day in San Francisco, including a tour on one of those double decker buses that are open on the top. Cruising through Golden Gate Park, the tour guide pointed out the statue of Thomas Starr King – whom he said was a Unitarian Minister who helped keep California from joining the confederacy during the civil war. Nancy and I cheered energetically. The tour guide was amazed – “no one has ever cheered for this statue before” he told us. I told him that I was a Unitarian Universalist minister and that I was proud of my heritage. He was even more amazed, likely thinking that UU minister’s were a thing of the past.

After that tour I realized, despite my cheering, and despite the fact that I attended a seminary named after Starr King, that I didn’t really know that much about him or his place in history. I knew he was both a Unitarian and Universalist minister. I knew he had been the minister of the San Francisco church, and that he was small and sickly. I also knew that in the mid twentieth century he had been chosen to represent California in the hall of statues at the US Capitol. And I knew that his statue had been replaced by Ronald Reagan in 2009 and had found a home on the Capitol grounds here in Sacramento. I wanted to learn more. Today I want to share with you what I learned.

First let’s talk about Starr King the man.

His father had been a shoemaker who became a Universalist minister. The ministry was open to his father because Universalists, unlike the Unitarians, did not require clergy to be college educated. These working-class Universalist roots were part of what shaped Starr King and his choices in life.

His father was serving a congregation in Charleston MA where he died when Starr King he was 15. The son then went to work as a clerk at a naval yard to support his mother and 5 siblings. This was the presumed end of his aspirations to college and a professional career. But it did not mean the end of his education. Being close to Harvard he attended lectures at night and read voraciously. He became acquainted with and mentored by several prominent Unitarian and Universalist ministers and scholars who saw his brilliance.

His life changed by the grace of one of his mentors, the Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker. When Parker could not accept an offer to preach he recommended Starr King. ***“This young man, is not a regularly ordained preacher, but he has the grace of God in his heart, and the gift of tongues. He is a rare, sweet spirit and I know that after you have met with him you will thank me for sending him to you.”*** This one sermon led to other invitations, and ultimately a call to serve the congregation in Charleston MA where his father had served. He was just shy of 22 years old.

Soon his reputation grew and both Universalist and Unitarian churches expressed interest in calling him.

King was quite aware that he did not have the typical educational path of most Unitarian ministers – he did not go to Harvard, in fact he described himself as a graduate of the Charleston naval shipyard. When the Unitarian church of New York offered their pulpit if he agreed to attend Harvard for one year, he declined. Two years later that Harvard granted him an honorary degree. Eventually he settled at the Hollis Street church in Boston. A prestigious pulpit, but a congregation that had been pulled part by anti-slavery and temperance issues. King had turned down a previous offer from Hollis street, his health was at risk and the effort to help rebuild the church seemed beyond him. But after a long vacation he was ready for new challenges. But the pay was low, and to support his own wife and children as well as his mother and siblings, he became active and popular on the lyceum lecture circuit. But it wore him out.

For Starr King, his strong intellect, big heart and bright spirit were not matched by his physical health. Biographer Arnold Compton described him as “a small slender man frail in appearance.” Poor health would plague King for his whole life.

So why did he come to California? Many prestigious churches were interested in him, and he rejected them all because he was worried that too much would be expected of him.

Biographer Arliss Unger describes his decision this way -

But his health was failing; he felt he could no longer keep up the pace. After months of consideration, he took a leave of absence from the Hollis Street Church and left Boston for San Francisco hoping, perhaps, for better weather, for a location which, by its remoteness, would relieve the temptation to lecture so much, and for a place where he could “be somebody”.

“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”

He hoped he would not be so looked down upon because he had no earned academic degree. Remarking on the elitism and parochialism of Boston King said

“I do think we are unfaithful in huddling so closely around the cozy stove of civilization in this blessed Boston, and I, for one, am ready to go out into the cold and see if I am good for anything.”

Before I share with you his role in California History history I need to set some context. I learned a great deal from my reading because I assume that California had no significant role in the Civil war. Little did I know how important California was, and the role that Starr King played in it.

CA in 1860 was still barely a state, with fragmented government with multiple warring political parties, no railroad, no telegraph until 1861, and was poor connected to the East and the national government.

Many of the immigrants to CA were from slave states and had strong allegiance to the confederacy. At the time Starr King arrived, governor and most members of the CA legislature were pro-confederacy southern democrats. On the fourth of July in 1861 it was the confederate flag that flew over the plaza in Los Angeles.

During the time leading up to the war, there were four competing ideologies for the role of California in the conflict - remain neutral, support the confederacy, support the union, or form an independent republic. Any choice other than supporting the union would have been disastrous for the United states primarily because Ca had lots of money - whichever side of the conflict got access to that money would have a big advantage.

So, into the melee arrives Thomas Starr King, by ship from Boston. The San Francisco Unitarian church only knew King by his reputation – no one from the church had ever seen him. Let me just say that he was not – visually impressive.

One member of the congregation wrote a letter home describing King’s first sermon at the church:

The first feeling with many, on seeing Mr King was disappointment. He was so very diminutive, looked so young and was so very different in outward appearance from what we expected. The crowd went to hear him out of curiosity, expecting never to go again. Thinking perhaps to leave before the service was over.

But when he began there was no restlessness. His voice charmed them, and before he finished they knew they had a great man before them.

Once established in San Francisco King put his skills to good use in both his church and the state. Despite his intentions to limit his lecturing, he was drawn into the challenge of the times and became a voice for the union, arousing audiences with his lectures on patriotism. Here he describes his lectures to a friend:

“Such stillness, and then such laughter! Such applause and then such ominous quiet when I gave them a “free soil” touch. I pledged California to a Northern Republic and to a flag that should have no treacherous threads of cotton in its warp and the audience came down to thunder.”

His words have power for us today. Writing in the Daily Beast September 2017 Gil Troy said of King's call patriotism

Amid America's ugly brawl over slavery, King never let his patriotism turn harsh, defensive, pinched, or xenophobic. His patriotism was lyrical, expansive, idealistic, charitable and redemptive. Just 10 years ago, Ronald Reagan's statue replaced King's in the Capitol's National Statuary Hall. In this age of Monumental musical chairs, let's move the marbleized figure of this big-hearted patriot into Donald Trump's Oval Office--immediately.

Here is a sample from a speech by King:

Patriotism is a constructive quality, quickening the intellect by its love of country to zealous ambition to improve it and raise it higher. It will tell a land of its faults, as a friend will counsel a companion and, if occasion requires, an indignation will flame out of its love.

True patriotism, which labors to keep a nation faithful to its mission, cannot be satisfied unless the ideas of human worth and privilege that awakened and supported our political struggle, ripen and produce their finest spiritual fruit.

King exerted his influence in three ways: engagement in the political scene vigorously supporting anti-slavery candidates, lecturing all over the west in support of the union, and raising money for the Sanitary commission. These efforts resulted in California staying in the union and making significant contributions to the war effort.

Through his sermons, lectures and political efforts, Starr King had accumulated significant influence, and he used this influence to raise funds for the US Sanitary Commission, the precursor of the American Red Cross. The US Sanitary commission was run by Henry Bellows a unitarian minister in New York and a friend of Starr King. The U.S. government at this time had

very few ways to raise funds, and had limited resources to support the care of injured soldiers. Of the 5 million dollars raised by the states in the union, California contributed 25% percent – largely through the efforts of Starr King.

“Thus far we have poured out no blood on the soil soaked with the loyal tide! Give, give I pray you, there are no enemies in the hospital or the grave. Shall history say that electric California alone was laggard? Shall it be said that rich, generous California was the only state whose blood did not bond in union and sympathy with her loyal sisters.”

Starr King even managed to raise \$20k from flood ravaged Sacramento. He remarked:
It is a most honorable and really to me an amazing subscription. The movement for its collection was made after a lecture of mine there, and I feel more proud of it than anything that has been done in the state.

Starr King lived for four remarkable years in California before he died of diphtheria and pneumonia in 1864. He was 39 years old. Flags in San Francisco flew at half mast, government offices closed, the California legislature took a three-day recess to mourn. Memorial cannons boomed across union square as his body lay wrapped in the American flag at the altar of his church.

At the dedication of his statue at the US Capital in 1931 Senator Hiram Johnson said” ***Thomas Starr King at the beginning of the civil war found the people of his adopted state uncertain as to her future course. With dauntless purpose and high enthusiasm, he entered the momentous struggle there and by his matchless eloquence and indefatigable labors contributed in great measure to maintain California as a member of the federal union.***

There is so much more about his life to share that doesn’t fit into a Sunday morning. I could have told you about his love of Yosemite, and how his articles in a Boston newspaper helped people on the East Coast appreciate its beauty. I could have told you about his anti-racist efforts, and his outreach to the African American community in California. I could have told you about his legendary sense of humor, or his commitments to the arts and culture. But that is for another time.

What is our take-away from his story? I chose to bring this sermon to you partly because I wanted you to be aware of this great Universalist and Unitarian hero. I wanted you to appreciate his role in California history.

But I also believe that the stories of our heroes are most powerful when we can relate to them as people and be inspired to possibility in our own lives. Starr King was given many gifts, his personal magnetism, his intellect, his language and oratory skills. At the same time, he was

small of stature, not formally educated and suffered ill health for most of his life. He could have stayed in the East Coast, held a nice pastorate and likely lived a longer life. But he chose to take the risky route by coming to California and did not sit by when called to serve his adopted state and country. His story helps us to see how we create the trajectory of our lives by the choices we make. He lived a life of courage and commitment.

He had gifts that moved crowds, but much of his power came from his authenticity and compassion. We will give biographer Arnold Compton the last work on Thomas Starr King

Human beings were the breath of life to him. Perhaps here is the secret of his personal magnetism. The legend shows us a hero whom people worshipped. The man had infinite capacity to give and receive human love. He was direct and honest in a kindly way. He drove himself to give to life fully as well as to receive because he felt that his years would be few.

We were blessed by his years and his gifts. May his life be an inspiration to us in these days of turmoil.

Blessed Be