

The Forgotten Mr. King

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Our country is in a state of partisanship which feels more extreme than any I have ever known. While the debate over the outcome of our most recent Presidential elections were incredibly polarizing and emotionally intense - today's climate is filled with those of us who feel like we have more to gain, more to lose, and something even greater to prove.

Last June, in the middle of electioneering and gearing up for our national Republican and Democratic conventions, we experienced the passing of President Ronald Reagan. In the subsequent weeks of public mourning, patriotic fervor, and political protests many proposals to honor our past President came to the fore. There were several propositions to add his visage to various denominations of U.S. currency, which sparked a new partisan debate, as most of the suggested coins and bills depict past Democratic leaders.

According to a San Francisco Chronicle article published on June 9th, 2004, "Representative Christopher Cox, R-Newport Beach (Orange County), who served as a lawyer in the Reagan administration, fears that the debate over putting Reagan on currency could prove divisive. Cox is proposing an alternative: Each state has two statues in the marbled halls of the Capitol, and California now has statues of Junipero Serra, the Franciscan priest who helped colonize California, and Thomas Starr King, a Unitarian minister who persuaded state leaders not to secede during the Civil War. If the Legislature and governor approve, a statue of Reagan could appear in Statuary Hall or the Rotunda...

'Just as Kansas recently replaced one of their statues with a favorite son, Dwight Eisenhower, so might we replace the long-forgotten Mr. King with President Reagan,' Cox said."

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As you might imagine the article was immediately noticed by several Unitarian Universalists in our area and spread throughout our cyberspace rapidly. The sad truth is that Rev. Thomas Starr King has been largely forgotten - so much so that the Chronicle listed him as a Unitarian minister, when in truth he was ordained as a Universalist, following in the footsteps of his father who was also an ordained Universalist minister. The oversight was understandable. Starr King seems to have predicted an evolution that took us another century to achieve, by combining his Universalist ministry with service in two Unitarian churches.

When challenged on his religious loyalties and asked how he could keep faith with both traditions, Starr King quipped, "The one [Universalist] thinks God is too good to damn them forever, the other [Unitarian] thinks they are too good to be damned forever." In his

opinion, the only reason that the two denominations had not already been consolidated into one was that they were "too near of kin to be married."

As I learn more of the amazing achievements of Thomas Starr King's brief 39 years of life, I am struck again and again by how he clung to wholeness and completeness in all of his undertakings. This was a man who did not believe in a subdivided and segregated world. He did not believe in seceding from the Union, in a divided Christian church, or in a nation which categorized people by simplistic differences and judged their worth accordingly.

He is celebrated for many accomplishments in his life. At just 24 years of age, after leaving his first settlement in his father's Universalist church, Starr King accepted a call to the Hollis Street Church (a Unitarian congregation) in Boston. During this time he made his reputation as a gifted speaker, traveling the circuit as an itinerant preacher so that he could earn enough money to support his family.

Starr King believed that the legacy of the Christian tradition was a responsibility to justice in the living world. During his ministry at the Hollis Street Church, he wrote the following on social justice, "In whatever way the spirit of social justice can be made to enter more deeply into our policy, or domesticate itself in new features of our code with disruption of order - in plans of land reform - in adjustments of the relations of labor, so that the laborer may be more efficiently a man [sic] - in the projection of schemes for the safety and nurture of the perishing classes - we are called on cautiously to make the experiment; and to show how far and with what results the forces of society may shoot out into regions that have hitherto been abandoned to the... laws of competition and the caprices of 'private charity.'"

This engagement with the spirit of social justice inspired many, and earned him the accolades that stand as literal monuments to this day. There are mountains named after him in the White Hills of New Hampshire and in Yosemite National Park. There is a great tree in Yosemite which bears his name, along with many schools and of course the possibly transient statue currently gracing our nation's capitol. It is rare that a preacher receives such notice and acclaim. Remarkably, his greatest achievement was completed in the four short years he spent in our state before his death in 1864.

As noted in a history of Starr King from the seminary which bears his name, "Abraham Lincoln said he believed the Rev. Thomas Starr King was the person most responsible for keeping California in the Union during the early days of the Civil War."

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When Rev. Thomas Starr King arrived in California in 1860, California had only been a state for 10 years. He made the long journey from Boston with his family to accept a call at the Unitarian church in San Francisco.

At that time our Governor and many members of our state legislature were known to be sympathizers with the Confederacy. There was so much anti-Union sentiment in Southern California that the confederate flag had flown on the main plaza in Los Angeles on the fourth of July. I guess I should have been less surprised last spring when I saw a confederate flag bumper sticker in our own parking lot.

Starr King campaigned for the election of Abraham Lincoln, an activity which would be illegal in today's political world. You will notice that I will not try to influence how you vote in November, though I will remind you repeatedly to do so. He campaigned for Lincoln by preaching from his church and as an itinerant preacher to the small mining towns of the state.

California did end up voting to elect Abraham Lincoln, but that election only passed by a slim 717 vote margin. As noted in the Thomas Starr King history hosted by Starr King School for the Ministry, "At that time the US Congress was so convinced of a secessionist plot that it required Easterners to secure passports for travel to California. Justifying Congress' fears was a secret paramilitary California secessionist organization of about 16,000 members, called the Knights of the Golden Circle." Early in the civil war, Starr King made a decision to devote all of his time to preserving the Union.

Rev. Thomas Starr King began his campaign to save California for the North on George Washington's birthday in 1861. His two hour address reminded the over 1000 listeners of how they could honor Washington by preserving the country he helped to found. Of his speech Starr King said, "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 in thunder."

Starr King embodied a level of Patriotism that is rarely seen in today's religious world. As he noted in our reading this morning, he made a point to preach on "our responsibility as members of the American government, as entrusted in part with the destiny of an Empire." He covered the pulpit from which he preached with an American flag and ended his sermons with the words, "God bless the president of the United States and all who serve with him the cause of a common country."

As noted by Starr King historian, Arliss Ungar, "Starr King fervently believed in his country in a way that is almost unknown in the United States today. A contemporary said that 'With Mr. King, his religion was the central motive of his life, and his patriotism sprang directly from it as naturally as the rose from the bush or the apple from the tree.'"

When questioned on the correctness of preaching the cause of justice and country, Rev. King replied, "a preacher who does not find the Old and New Testaments [sic] urging him to stand up for his [sic] whole country and the cause of civilization, must own a Bible that is covered with dead and barren lava, not a living volcano of all noble and sacred truth."

His efforts did not end once California made its decision to remain in the union. Instead he turned his attention to supporting a good friend and Unitarian minister, Henry Whitney Bellows, in raising money for the United States Sanitary Commission, which at the time was charged with overseeing the health and medical care of the U.S. army. Over a quarter of the funding from the entire nation was raised by Thomas Starr King in the state of California. The U.S. Sanitary Commission later became the American Red Cross.

The little that I have told you this morning does not begin to cover the breadth of Starr King's life work. He is noted for his campaigns for the rights of African Americans, Chinese Americans, and Native Americans. He is noted for his passion as a naturalist and his love for Yosemite.

"In 1913 the state legislature voted Thomas Starr King and Father Junipero Serra, the Catholic missionary, as California's two greatest heroes and appropriated the funds for King's statue at the U.S. Capitol."

And now that accolade has come into question. The advice we have been given is to not have a loud, vocal response of outrage or concern. In the face of very little reaction to Representative Cox's proposal, it has been suggested that we remain quiet, lest more people take notice and bring momentum to this project. I know that our Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministries are keeping a close watch on the situation so that we can mobilize if need be.

In truth I did not bring up Rep. Cox's words as a call to action. It is not the threat of losing a statue that concerns me. There is another needed response, a crucial response, which is one of education and knowing our own history.

Cox's epithet, "the long-forgotten Mr. King" is not so far off the mark. We need to remember and celebrate this remarkable man, whose short time among us left a legacy that we are still trying to live up to, to this very day. I know that I had not heard of Rev. Thomas Starr King until I decided to apply to the seminary that has been named in his memory. I wonder how many of you reacted with puzzlement when hearing of this morning's topic.

In this one short life lays the precursor of our consolidation into the Unitarian Universalist Association. Here a battle was fought for a ministry of justice, and a nation which lived its professed values of freedom and equality. They say that Rev. Thomas Starr King won California for the Union and that the gold and natural resources of California won the civil war for the North. Imagine what our world might have been like if one man decided to follow his doctors' orders, take better care of his health, and spend more time at home. In truth we might have had him in California for more than four years.

If only in your hearts, memories, and minds please work with me to remove the "long-forgotten" epithet from the visionary, preacher, servant and prophet Rev. Thomas Starr King. His words are words to live by.

May we remember the exhortation of Rev. Thomas Starr King in these words, "Make a principle a guest in your heart, - by denying the worldly side of your nature, by fettering passion, conquering pride, living for something other than luxury, using money for good, drilling the will to loyalty, - and it will become thus an immeasurable gain as a resource to your soul."

Let us remember him.
Amen, Ashe, and Blessed Be.