

Missing Persons
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson
June 28, 2009

Recently, Dr David Kessler, former head of the FDA, published a book about how food companies have captured our brains. We all know that there is a food crisis in the US – obesity is on the rise while at the same time more and more people are going hungry. The number of backyard gardens is increasing – indeed there are some backyard farms now. I read of a couple in Oakland who, in about 4000 square feet in their backyard, in a crime ridden neighborhood raise vegetables, chickens geese and ducks, goats and even pigs! The awareness of food is at an all time high. Food books are popular; locally, Jonathan Gold, food critic for the LA Weekly won a Pulitzer Prize a year ago for food writing the first ever.

Foodies are all over. I suppose I am one of them, and I know I am not the only one in this congregation. I spend a great deal of time thinking about food, shopping for food and preparing it. I often switch back and forth between the food channel and the golf channel on TV. Home kitchens are approaching restaurant quality [won't someone please give me a wood burning bread oven?]. Dining for Dollars is one of our important fundraisers – Kathe and I had one last night. A pretty good meal – a crab, mango and avocado starter with a pineapple/melon puree, green garlic soup - main course was halibut with a dynamite herbaceous spicy sauce, sautéed swiss chard with garlic and lemon, a mushroom risotto and for desert - root beer floats. The best part, though, was the company. I have tons of cookbooks. Anyone hungry?

So summer is icumen in, as the ancient bard said and time to reflect on life. I go on vacation on the 1st, and am on call in August. I plan to read a lot, have a knee operation on July 15, hopefully get away for a week with Kathe, pick tomatoes and beans from the garden, eat the corn and reflect on the meaning of life, try, as I do, to understand how to live my life better. So I will be out for the month of July. I am not going to hike the Appalachian Trail nor go to Argentina.

Sermons have funny ways of starting, don't they? This will become a sermon about the Rev Thomas Starr King and Ronald Reagan and the meaning of life, and here I am talking about my back yard garden and food. But when I read the review of Kessler's book, it struck me that there is a lesson in his investigation into the food industry.

The review says that the book had its origin in chocolate chip cookies, and that Kessler – remember him?" He was known for his dogged pursuit of the tobacco industry – to test his resolve, bought two gooey, chewy chocolate chip cookies and left them out on his kitchen counter with the intent to NOT eat them. He noticed, however, that he began to think about them often, though he was able to avoid sneaking a bite.

He left the house, and the cookies remained uneaten. Feeling triumphant, he stopped for coffee, saw cookies on the counter and gobbled one down.

"Why does that chocolate chip cookie have such power over me?" Dr. Kessler asked in an interview. "Is it the cookie, the representation of the cookie in my brain? I spent seven years trying to figure out the answer."

His finding was, not surprisingly, that food companies have tied into the pleasure centers in our brains with fats and sugars. We eat those chocolate chip cookies because they taste so good. Fats and sugars – we feel good when we have some ice cream or a doughnut or a piece of good chocolate.

We have bought into a culture of food, Kessler, argues, that rewards us with pleasure. The current emphasis on healthier food and more sustainable food production is good, to be sure, and a counter to the food that keeps us fat, happy and unhealthy. But we live in a world that seems to believe that the satisfaction of personal desires is our highest end and that pleasure is what brings happiness.

So I thought of Thomas Starr King, who was minister of the Unitarian Church in San Francisco from 1860 to 1864, and who Abraham Lincoln credited with keeping California in the Union and out of the confederacy during the Civil War. King was honored by California for years by being one of the two

statues states are allowed in the Statuary Hall in the Rotunda of the House of Representative Building in Washington DC. Junipero Serra has been the other statue.

Some notes about King – you probably know little about him, maybe nothing, but he was one of our greats.

Thomas Starr King was born on December 17, 1824 in New York City. His father was a Universalist minister and both of his parents urged Thomas's early education. By all measures, he was a very bright kid, and gave his first sermon at age 13. His father died two years later and Thomas became the breadwinner for the family, ending hopes of higher education and a career in the ministry. Remember that at that time, being a minister was about the highest you could go in the professional realm – how times have changed and mighty have fallen!

He went to work in the Charlestown, Mass shipyards, but had a job that gave him time to go to lectures at Harvard and in nearby Boston. He would later say he was a graduate of the Charlestown Navy Yard [Melville said that whaling ships had been his Harvard and Yale]. In 1845, when he was 21, Theodore Parker – another of our great 19th CE ministers - had to bow out of a speaking engagement and recommended King. Within the next year he was preaching at churches around the Boston area, and was called to the church in Charlestown, even though he had no college degree, was 21 and small – King was barely 5 ft tall and weighed about 120 pounds [think Hannah last Fall].

In 1848, he accepted a call to the Hollis St church in Boston. He had moved from a Universalist congregation to a Unitarian one, and it is his phrase that has come down – that the Universalists were those who believed that God was too good to damn them, and the Unitarians were those who believed they were too damned good.

He stayed there 11 years and then accepted a call to the newly formed, minister-less congregation of San Francisco. Rev Henry Whitney Bellows of New York City recommended him and urged King to go – Bellows being another of our greatest 19th CE ministers [and Melville's own minister]. And so the Rev Thomas Starr King arrived in California in 1860.

It was a heady time. The nation was wandering towards dissolution and civil war. California was teetering between being slave or free, and there was consideration of creating a Pacific Republic, separate from the United States. King was a gifted speaker, and had been a regular part of the lecture circuit in New England, and he gave speeches up and down Northern California in 1860, lectures disguised as campaign speeches for maintaining the Union and for Abraham Lincoln.

In the election, Lincoln carried California and its four electoral votes. California remained in the Union and a free state. Then came war, and Starr King turned his attention to raising money for the US Sanitary Commission – this was founded and led by Henry Whitney Bellows, and was the precursor to the American Red Cross, providing aid to soldiers wounded in fighting.

His sermons and lectures, up and down the Northern Coast, focused on preserving the Union and abolishing slavery. He took up the cause of gold miners and fought tirelessly for the poor.

I have carried around with me in my files, for years now, a sermon he once gave in San Francisco. The title is 'The Minister vs. the Parish' and in it, he defends the right, actually argues the need, for ministers to preach about politics and social conditions. A common phrase with preachers is that you should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. King saw no use for religion if it was just private and individual; he thought the church ought to reform and lead society, and that faith had to do with how we live rather than what we think or say.

He believed in community – in the redemptive power of community and of groups. Starr King told his congregation if they did not want to hear about politics and social issues, then they should just get rid of him, because he believed that Unitarianism, and Universalism, were about making a better world for all. He believed the liberal church could transform the world. He said this:

*'I hear frequently the charge that I preach politics,
and that it will make trouble if I do not desist.
This undoubtedly refers to the frequency of the treatment
I have given, during the last year or so,
to the Christian spirit and obligation of humanity,
and the application I have often made of it
to our responsibility as members of the American government,*

*as entrusted in part with the destiny of an Empire.
Wherever there is power there is trust and duty.
The preacher's business is with spiritual laws,
and their bearing upon or their application with
the duties and the action of common life.
If I think and see clearly how a great spiritual principle
may be honored by the method in which you can trade,
or use your money or exercise your genius, or live at home,
am I not bound to interpret that way,
leaving it for your conscience and your insight
to accept or refuse my interpretation?
And is there a person here who can tell me why a vote
shall be excluded from all treatment,
or allusion in the pulpit
if the preacher sees a spiritual law threading that,
just as clearly as he sees a Christian law
running through the ledger, the workshop, the house?
Wherever a human being has influence for good or for evil,
Religion is interested in him,
and the pulpit which represents that faith
is bound to be interested in that expression of him...
Let us understand each other on this point, once for all.
You certainly have the right, as well as the power,
to choose what type of preaching this pulpit shall represent;
as long as I stay in it, it will represent no other
than that I have just described -
not because I ever intend or desire to "preach politics,"
but because I feel I must preach devotion to humanity
as the highest outward form of the gospel
and the obligation of doing the most good that possibly can be done by all of a man's influence, by his
ballot as well as by his money and his words.'*

King, though hardly robust, loved the outdoors. He wrote a book about the White Mountains in New Hampshire that was more popular than Thoreau's Walden. He loved the Sierras and convinced Lincoln to make Yosemite a protected area. He thought that there was a deep and beautiful order to the creation, one we can perceive and for which we should care. He – like John Muir - saw the world as an interconnected web, both the natural world and human society. He saw links. Connections, order in life.

Like many UUs today, King believed that religious truths could as well be found in the world of nature as in the world's scriptures, and for King, what the world of nature argued was connection and relatedness – that was the highest spiritual value.

He said this:

*We are not intended to be separate, private persons,
but rather fibres, fingers and limbs.
The aim of religion is not to perfect us as persons,
looking at each of us apart from others.
The creator does not propose to polish souls like so many pins —
each one dropping off clean and shiny,
with no more organic relations to each other
than pins of a card...
There can be no such thing as justice,
until men, in large masses,
are rightly related to each other...*

He died of pneumonia on March 4th, 1864 – he was 39 years old.

You may have read recently that the statue of Starr King representing California no longer stands in the Rotunda of the House of Representatives in Washington, DC. It has been replaced by a statue of Ronald Reagan, following action several years ago by the State Assembly and Senate. This June 4th, King left for Sacramento and Reagan's statue was unveiled.

This is a travesty, and not just for Unitarians, for Starr King represents some of the very best in the human spirit and Reagan does not. I do not think there is any president of recent memory who did more damage to our national character than Ronald Reagan, nor many who did more for our national character than Thomas Starr King.

Reagan – all that affability aside – carries primary responsibility, I believe, for the selfishness, the materialism, and the idiotic anti-governmental mood we have found ourselves in. Others bear this blame as well, but no one so much as Reagan. His campaign slogan in 1980 – ‘Are you better off than you were four years ago’ turned upside down the moral demands of Kennedy and King – ‘Ask not what your country can do for you ...’ Kennedy asked and King asked what kind of country are we creating – one of freedom and justice he hoped. This was noble.

But, not Ronald Reagan – ‘are you better off’ suggesting that how others are doing is at best secondary. It was a plea for selfishness and is anti-social in the extreme. Think of the difficulty we are experiencing in having a national conversation about health care. How often do you hear the question ‘what kind of society are we creating in our health care system?’ No, the talk is of having to wait for specialists or individual choice in doctors. People die and we worry about unlimited choice. Thanks Ronnie. He used anecdotes for argument, but remember that the plural of anecdote is not data. His ‘welfare queen’ stories were cheats and demeaning.

He also said, way back then, that government was not the solution but the problem, and 40 plus years of trashing the government has brought us a trashy government. I lived in the DC area for a time, and knew a number of people who worked for the government – they were civil servants – that is, servants of our society, and almost all them thought of it in that way. It was honorable to serve in the government – now it is questioned. Thanks again.

Thomas Starr King asked the very best of people; he asked his congregation, his city, his state, his nation, to be more than they were. Reagan urged us to be less than we were or could be.

We need people like Starr King – leaders like him are all too often missing persons. The person of courage and of principle – all too often a missing person these days.

Like food, we have bought a shabby bill of goods these last 40+ years. Like food, it might feel good in the moment, but it is not healthy. Are you better off – do you mean do you have more things or are you a better person? Which is the better off we should seek?

I suppose there is some Starr King and some Ronald Reagan in each of us, but far better that we keep the Starr King part front and center, the noble side, the side that believes in justice and community. Let's leave the Reagan part aside and bring back Thomas Starr King!

Benediction - from Starr King

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.
God bends a boundless and sparkling sky over our heads;
but he offers a deeper heaven,

filled with more glorious lights and diviner promise,
to all souls that will welcome a principle,
go out and pitch their tent in the moral universe,
and live there