

**ADDRESS BEFORE THE FIRST
UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF SAN
FRANCISCO, IN MEMORY OF THEIR
LATE PASTOR, REV. THOMAS
STARR KING, MARCH 15, 1864**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649165285

Address before the First Unitarian society of San Francisco, in memory of their late pastor, Rev. Thomas Starr King, March 15, 1864 by Robert B. Swain

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Cover @ 2017

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ROBERT B. SWAIN

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OF SAN FRANCISCO,

IN MEMORY OF THEIR LATE PASTOR,

REV. THOMAS STARR KING,

MARCH 15, 1864.

BY ROBERT B. SWAIN.

PRINTED BY REQUEST.

SAN FRANCISCO:

FRANK EASTMAN, PRINTER, 415 WASHINGTON STREET.

1864.

RESOLUTIONS.

At a meeting of the congregation of the First Unitarian Society held at their Church, on Geary street, on the evening of March 15th, 1864, the following resolutions were offered, viz.:

It having pleased the Most High God to draw closer to His side, His servant our greatly beloved and honored pastor, THOMAS STARR KING, and inasmuch as this requisition, coming to him in the plenitude of fame, intellect, and usefulness, found him still "happy, resigned, trustful," it becomes us as Christian brethren to restrain the natural, but selfish impulses of grief, accepting the chalice commended to our lips, and bowing humbly to the Omnipotent will. Therefore be it

Resolved, That in the sublime spectacle of the death-bed of Thomas Starr King, we recognize a full and triumphant vindication of his faith as a teacher and his works as a man.

Resolved, That though it hath seemed fit to the Almighty to remove his mortal presence from among us, the subtle influence of his piety and genius still exists, and continues to transfuse and possess us; and that, although the pulpit of the church he has adorned remains empty, an emanation of his goodness still obtains in the pulpit of each man's heart, swaying and controlling its impulses, directing and guiding its promptings, and preaching "with the tongue of men and angels."

Resolved, That his ministration of this Society has been vital, creative and enduring; that it has been uniformly characterized by ceaseless toil and unabated zeal, even to the sacrifice of health and the precipitation of death—by an eloquence earnest, truthful and convincing—by erudition thorough, complete and reliable—by fervor, boldness and originality that have attached the lukewarm and indifferent—by a humanity that was broad, catholic, all-sympathizing and tolerant—by a gentleness that was winning without being weak—by a force that was decisive in results, though unfeeling in its processes—and by those rare undefinable social graces and courtesies which, as they were not beneath the Guest of the bride of Cana, are the attributes of a Christian gentleman.

Resolved, That as citizens of this republic we deplore, with the nation, the loss of a courageous heart and brilliant intellect ever ready to battle in its defense, and that we deeply sympathize with the wounded soldiers in

battle-fields and hospitals, who will miss the priceless aid of him who yearned to them out of the brimming fullness of his patriotism, charity, and love.

Resolved, That we tenderly sympathize with the deep affliction of that family circle of which he was the life and light—offering to the stricken widow what consolation may be derived from the assurance, that a community are partners in her sorrow; to his widowed mother and kindred in a distant part of our country, the expression of our unfeigned grief, that they are bereaved of the wise counsels and affectionate solicitude of a noble son and brother; and to the fatherless children, the undying record of his fame as an inheritance and example to them forever.

Previous to their passage, Mr. R. B. Swain rose and said:

Before the resolutions are adopted, I cannot refrain from bearing my testimony to the purity of Mr. King's life, and offering to his memory the tribute of my profound admiration of his character, his genius, and his talents. I was early brought in contact with him—first by correspondence before his arrival, and afterwards as a co-laborer, though comparatively a humble one, in the cause of the church and of liberal Christianity. Knowing him so intimately, I have taken some pains to reduce to writing the thoughts that have occurred to me in reference to his life and his early death, in order that I may present them in a regular and consecutive form. For what relates to our beloved pastor, should now be the property of the Society over which he presided, and of which he was the life and light. His sayings and doings—his acts of mercy—his goodness of heart, constantly prompting him to deeds of charity—his transcendent genius, which shone forth most brilliantly in the privacy of social and familiar relations—his innate purity of character—his unselfishness, which made him ambitious to sacrifice his own comfort to promote the comfort of others—his humility, which rendered him incapable of knowing his own goodness and greatness, and oftentimes led him to estimate too feebly his own powers—his reverence, which carried his soul above the transitory things of earth, and gave him aspirations towards Heaven and his God;—all these constitute an endowment of priceless memories bequeathed to the Society in whose service he so faithfully labored, and for which he died. In the few remarks I have to offer upon the resolutions, I shall confine

myself chiefly to narrative; but I would not, if I could, withhold the repeated expression of my love of him as a man, a patriot, and a Christian—the most pure in his thoughts, the most unselfish in his character, with whom it has been my good fortune to be associated.

I said I first knew Mr. King through correspondence. After the departure of our former pastor, Mr. Cutler, and during the temporary ministrations of Mr. Buckingham, the Board of Trustees negotiated, through friends at the East, for a permanent pastor. We were slightly encouraged to believe that Mr. King, then presiding over the Hollis Street Society in Boston, might be induced to come here, and through a Committee of the Board, Mr. Brooks and Mr. Lambert, who were fortunately in Boston at that time, negotiations were opened with him upon the subject. I must confess that I had but little hope that he could be secured for this Society—for I knew how he was loved and prized by his own parishioners, for whom he had done such essential service during a period of ten years, and how his fame and reputation as a divine and lecturer were as wide as the continent itself. But we believed that he would have a great field here; and were encouraged to hope that his comparative youth, his spirit of self-sacrifice, and the necessity of seeking a new field of labor to renew his physical energies, which had been much exhausted by study and over-exertion, would tempt him to listen, at least, to our call, and perhaps to adopt for a season this vigorous and prosperous State, as the field of his labors. Fortunate, indeed, was it for this Society, and fortunate for California, that he came. Without him, who can now say what would, to-day, have been our condition? Who can now say that we would not have been hurled into the vortex of secession, or that there would not have been inaugurated the scheme of a Pacific Republic, for which our delegation in Congress were manœuvring, and which would have made this happy, peaceful State, a scene of fire and blood, between the contending fury of loyalty and treason.

Mr. King's first communication, in answer to our call, was made in the month of September, 1859, to the Committee then in Boston. It is an admirable illustration of his frankness and

candor, and, although a private letter, there are no good reasons why the most of it should not be read here. His peculiar sincerity and earnestness are stamped in every line. Dr. Bellows, who, I am proud to say, was my pastor for many years in New York, had been commissioned, in conjunction with the Committee, to obtain a pastor for us—but they had been enjoined to make application to no man whose fame was not already secured, and whose name was not eminent among the ministers of our faith—for it was certain that with any feebler man, our then tottering Society would become bankrupt and ruined, perhaps, forever. How well the task was performed, let the present condition of our Society, and, indeed, let the prosperity of our State, to-day, answer. Aided by the powerful influence of Dr. Bellows, negotiations were opened with Mr. King *direct*. At that time his own Society, to which he had devotedly attached himself, was claiming a continuation of his services, and a Committee from a strong Society in Cincinnati were clamoring loudly for him to remove thither, and become *their* pastor, offering inducements which no ordinary man, no *selfish* man, could have resisted. As Chairman of the Board of Trustees, the correspondence fell to me. Facts and figures as to our prospects were sent to Dr. Bellows. Nothing very flattering as to the past, could be presented; but our prospects, with a strong man, were set forth in brilliant colors. It seemed quite certain, that there was a large field for the growth of our faith in this State, under the leadership of such a man as Mr. King proved to be, and our claims were pushed with all possible zeal, and even with audacity.

The letter which I now propose to read to you, convinced us that Mr. King, of all men, was best adapted to our wants; and notwithstanding he was constrained to answer our call in the negative, we *refused* to abide by his decision. The letter is as follows:—

Boston, September 22, 1859.

MY DEAR SIR: I was on the point of writing to you in Brattleboro, when your letter of this morning came.

It has been impossible for me to reply at an earlier date. I have been very busy consulting intimate friends, obtaining information, and forecasting the trouble, difficulty, and losses of uprooting myself and family here, while not a little time has been absorbed in studying my own inclinations,

heart and resources for such duties as the post in San Francisco would demand.

The result of all my inquiries, consultations and reflections, stands thus: 1st. Very grave doubts as to the ability of the parish to pay the salary named to me. Gentlemen who know the Unitarian Society there pretty well, have assured friends of mine, that the parish is not united—that there are a great many great draw-backs to the popularity of a liberal faith in the city, and that with a debt of \$12,400 on which the Society pay 12 per cent. interest, and a floating debt of \$1,000, no man with talents less electric than Chapin's, Beecher's, or Dr. Bellows', could put the parish in a condition to pay such a salary. And I am assured that I could not live in San Francisco—being myself a very poor economist—for less than \$5,000, at least, with my family.

I find that I must sacrifice nearly \$2,000 on house and furniture and books, if I uproot here. Then there is the expense of removal with my wife and daughter; then the cost of setting up anew out there, the return expenses, and the new housekeeping costs, two or three years hence, if I come back.

The risks are very great. I am a poor man; I have worked very hard for ten years, have had heavy extra expenses, which still continue, and cannot afford to give up such certainties as are before me here, for the ventures of so distant a field of labor. Every year my lecture opportunities enlarge. I should abandon that field in going to San Francisco, and might not be able to re-enter it so favorably.

Then beyond all this, I have misgivings as to my qualification for such work as your Society needs, to fill the Church with numbers and enthusiasm. I am not extempore enough—electric enough—so I fear. You need a temperament like Dr. Bellows', or a stirring preacher like Chapin, to enable the parish to fulfill such promises as Mr. Swain's note to me contained. From all that I have heard and thought, therefore, I *dare not* trust to my power of infusing ability enough in the parish to produce the requisite receipts. I have too much at stake.

Yet I feel very strongly the attractions of the field. If I could properly go to San Francisco on a smaller salary, I would gladly do so, and work to the best of my power for the good of your parish and our noble cause. Or if I could have gone out to California on the invitation of the Mercantile Library Association, last spring, independently of the parish, and preached in the city and surveyed the field for lecturing, I could possibly have found firm ground for an affirmative reply to your call.

But as the whole subject has shaped itself, since my inquiries and serious thought, and with the firm conviction that many of the inducements must prove illusory, nothing seems to be left to me, at present, but to decline the call. Several of my own parishioners were well disposed, at first, to the movement, and would be still, if they were convinced that the basis is firm. But they cannot advise me, otherwise than against it, as the matters look to them now. I have told you frankly my whole mind, and I can only

offer you, with sincere thanks for your kindness and complimentary call, my cordial co-operation in obtaining a man who can prudently go on a smaller salary than would be necessary for me.

With cordial regards, believe me,

Faithfully yours,

T. S. KING.

This letter contained one single paragraph upon which we felt that we could hang a hope of success, and, accordingly, by return of mail, the Trustees dispatched to Dr. Bellows such documents as removed from Mr. King's mind all doubts as to his true duty. He accepted *promptly*—as promptly as he did *everything* when convinced of the path in which he should tread. By an early mail a letter was received from Mr. Lambert, one of our Committee, enclosing a note to him from Mr. King, as follows:—

BOSTON, January 2, 1860.

MY DEAR FRIEND: I hasten to say that I have written my resignation to the Hollis Street Parish, which will be offered this evening. To-morrow, I shall write to the Committee in San Francisco, so that the letter shall go by the mail of the 5th. Probably I shall stay there, if I live, two years. I have no time for further particulars this morning.

I hope I have made no mistake in deciding to go so far without going permanently. But trusting and praying that I may be of service to the noble brethren and the good cause in San Francisco, and pledging to you all my power to that end, during my stay there, I am, with cordial thanks for all your kindness, sincerely yours,

T. S. KING.

The following steamer brought Mr. King's letter of acceptance—so noble, so frank, that it should ever be preserved in the archives of this Society as a memento of his goodness, and an enduring monument of his liberal, self-sacrificing spirit:—

BOSTON, January 3, 1860.

R. B. SWAIN, *Chairman of Trustees*

of Unitarian Parish, San Francisco:—

MY DEAR SIR: As I am now addressing you for the first time, in reply to many kind and important communications, it is proper that I should explain to you my long silence. When your letters and documents of Nov. 3d reached me, I had just received a very urgent call to remove to Cincinnati, to take charge of a Society recently organized there. I had not anticipated such a response to my letter to Mr. Brooks, as your parish so generously returned. I supposed that the correspondence had ceased. Mr. Lambert was in quest of another minister for you, and as the movement in Cincinnati was backed by strong letters from prominent Unitarian clergymen, I found