

Clarence Russell Skinner:  
First Things First  
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“How to transform this old Earth into the Kingdom of Heaven? That’s the primal question.” The Universalist theologian, activist and clergyman Clarence Russell Skinner first posed this question in his 1913 book, “The Social Implications of Universalism,” and he devoted his entire working life to helping others answer it. Skinner is often referred to as the greatest Universalist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though no one seems to agree on why. The confusion is compounded by the reality that Skinner was not an organized or prolific writer of textbooks; he wrote no systematic theology; he never raised millions of dollars; the theological school in which he taught closed some years ago. Perhaps most telling of all, the religious denomination into which he was born and which he served all his life was subsumed into a larger faith tradition that, in some important ways, already had begun to move in the opposite direction from Skinner’s own faith and practice. Thus the encomium granted to him as the greatest Universalist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is often used as a throwaway line, perhaps best compared to the greatest king of an extinct people.

But Universalism, writ both small and large, has become more important to many more people in the last decade or so, and as it has, the desire to know more about Skinner and to understand his influence on our liberal faith continues to grow. In keeping with the kind of person he was, his greatest impact can be found not in our seminary libraries but in our sanctuaries. We take for granted the worship innovations of the Community Church movement he began in partnership with his longtime friend and fellow pacifist John Haynes Holmes; with little fanfare we read as often from the work of Mary Oliver, Alice Walker and The New York Times as we do from Genesis, Isaiah, and the Gospel of Mark. We unconsciously measure the practice of our faith against the 1917 Universalist Declaration of Social Principles, crafted in larger measure by Skinner; those principles are as much a part of our religious DNA as the Unitarian branch of social activism mythically codified by Theodore Parker with his pistol lying on his writing desk. We assume as a matter of course not only the multitheological character of our Unitarian Universalist congregations, but the expectations we have of ourselves as ministers who must meet the needs of such congregations over time .

Yet none of these things were a given 100 years earlier, or even 75 years ago. Others among us have made the attempt to create a multitheological voice, not the least of which has been Kenneth Patton, but they have most often done so by eliding the differences among us , constructing an Esperanto faith tradition that too often served to irritate everyone as they learned a wholly new, and largely unsatisfactory language of spirituality. Clarence Skinner, like the teacher and pastor that he was, sought instead to inspire his students, his congregants and others to a level of theological literacy that prepared them for Universalism of the broadest sort. He spoke of this literacy as “a consciousness of the universals and the unities”<sup>1</sup> and believed it to be the fruit of consistent spiritual practice-- of which the experience of worship was the most important part.

It was many years before Clarence Skinner entered into this phase of his career, however. Born in Brooklyn, NY into a family of communicators, Clarence Russell Skinner was the son of the 19<sup>th</sup> century journalist and folklorist Charles Montgomery Skinner, who spent many years as an editor of the Brooklyn Eagle, a local newspaper with a national reputation. His uncle was the actor Otis Skinner, his cousin the actor and author Cornelia Otis Skinner (her memoir, “Our Hearts Were Young and Gay,” was required reading in one of my high school English classes). He was surrounded by literature and art and music and theater, and for much of his life, family and friends supposed that he would find his way into one of these areas as a profession.

But there was also a family history of Universalist ministry-- Clarence's grandfather, his great-grandfather and his great-uncle all had answered the call, and the family were long-time members of All Souls Universalist congregation in Brooklyn, NY (still in existence, though now a federated church with the United Church of Christ). Perhaps the die was cast in 1900, when Clarence enrolled in St. Lawrence University in Canton NY, along with his high school friend, Louis Pink. The two would be steadfast friends for the next 50 years, as well as fellow church activists. It was also at St. Lawrence where Skinner met his wife, Clara Louise Ayers, daughter of a wealthy real estate investor from Stamford, Ct. Clarence was not the husband the Ayers initially had in mind for their daughter, but meeting him changed their mind; by their senior year, the two were engaged.

By the time the two had graduated from St. Lawrence, Clarence had undergone what most sources refer to as a nervous breakdown of sorts; he spent the summer recuperating with his grandfather in Vermont and thinking over his future, while his fiancé, Clara, toured Europe. There is little in the literature to reveal what happened to him during that eventful summer, but by the fall of 1904, his path was clear: Clarence Skinner had chosen the ministry. He had taken only a few theological courses at the theological school associated with St. Lawrence, but secured for himself a position as the assistant to the minister of the Church of the Divine Paternity, Frank Oliver Hall. The church, which had recently built its fifth home on Central Park West and 76<sup>th</sup> St., was engaged in a host of activities in keeping with the growing movement among liberal Protestant churches of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century known as the Social Gospel Movement. Though its most well known theoretician and practitioner was the Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch, there were few parts of the Christian church in the United States that were unaffected by the passionate desire of some members to give hands and feet to Jesus's admonition to love one's neighbor as one's self.

Frank Oliver Hall served such a congregation, and was known in his sermons to remind the members that "religion must be based in reality."<sup>ii</sup> For some time, the congregation that he served had attempted to address the realities of early 20<sup>th</sup> century New York City, through its Saturday school for new immigrants; its free kindergarten; its home for the aged—the first of its kind in New York; its weighing station for infants; its Sunshine Farm, which created a summer haven for ill and work-worn families many years before there was an organized "Fresh-Air Fund" in NY. Most important to the sensibilities of Clarence Russell Skinner and his friend Louis Pink, however, was the church's University Settlement House on East 53<sup>rd</sup> St, in Manhattan, part of the First Universalist Mission Society of New York, a joint project of the seven New York City Universalist churches in existence at that time.<sup>iii</sup> It was during the two years that Skinner spent as Hall's assistant that he and Pink were exposed on a regular basis to the genuine "realities" that made up life for the marginalized people of New York City. It was a lesson that neither Skinner nor Pink ever forgot, through their work on projects as varied as the Universalist Commission on Social

In a little known, lovely sermon on Skinner, "Clarence Skinner's Response to Life" the Universalist minister Clinton Lee Scott identified a critical distinction that separated Skinner from other ministers of the Social Gospel. Scott wrote: "[Skinner] shared in full the current passion for social righteousness. He was as sensitive as any to human misery and as courageous as any in his demands for social rights. But he was of a small number of preachers and educators ...whose convictions ..were able to withstand the terrible ordeal of the war and its aftermath...."

"One of the casualties of that first world war was the large number of men who lost their social vision. ...preachers, professors and writers, once the ardent advocates of a socialized order, either changed their views or sought fields where their liberalism would cause less pain and promise more respectability. It was a time of deep disillusionment. Through it all, Clarence Skinner stood like a rock. ...Doctor Skinner's house for faith was build on the solid rock of unshakable confidence in [humanity] and in [humanity's] capacity to improve. He believed in education of the right sort, and in [humanity's] educability."<sup>iv</sup>

Even after his ordination at the Church of the Divine Paternity, and his departure to take up the pulpits at the Universalist Church in Mount Vernon, NY, and later in Lowell, Mass., the notion of education for theological literacy would continue to dominate Skinner's life. In both congregations, Skinner himself conducted an active adult education program that in some ways presaged his work at both Crane Theological School and at the Community Church of Boston. The work of education began, of course, in the pulpit, but by necessity could not end there. He created a series of lectures that followed his own addresses on topics such as: "The New Religion," clearly a work in progress. As Charles Howe writes in his biographical essay, "Clarence Skinner: Prophet of a New Universalism," the series of lectures "provided a model of how a church might become an effective agent for change without sacrificing its traditional function of worship."<sup>v</sup>

It was a model that reached fruition in the founding of the Community Church of Boston, founded in 1920 as a laboratory of sorts for the New Religion that Skinner well knew the world needed, a religion that could embrace both the mystic and the scientific, a religion that met people where they were and at the same time drew them toward something greater. In explaining something of the church's history, The Rev. Peter Richardson speaks of the congregation's practice of using weekly readings, not exclusively from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, but from "the entire field of human thought," both ancient and modern. Richardson wrote that, in response to those who objected to this innovation, Skinner replied that "the Boston Community Church feels that truth and inspiration are their 'own excuse for being' and that no ecclesiastical authority or sanction is necessary for a reading which lifts the spirit, catches fire in men's hearts, and reveals some noble reach of imagination."

Richardson's brief history records the success of Skinner's approach. By 1927, he wrote, "the church moved its worship to Symphony Hall, drawing 1800 on the first Sunday, sometimes filling it to its 2600 capacity, averaging above 1200, at least through 1930. It is safe to say there were thousands in its constituency through its several moves in large rented spaces... Its constituency was global, multi religious, multi ethnic and multi racial long before the civil rights movement brought the issue before the general public..."<sup>vi</sup>

Perhaps the work that most succinctly captures this portion of Clarence Skinner's vision is his out-of-print work, *Worship and the Well-Ordered Life*, published posthumously in 1955. The words with which he begins his examination are words worthy to end this brief glimpse of his life; on a personal note, they are words I come back to again and again in my own work, in no small measure because I view my own call to ministry as one in which I hold in trust some of the work which Skinner himself began:

...If religion is to endure as a vital, creative force in modern life, worship must be more intelligently understood and more generally valued....a vital, life-directing religion is of supreme value to our day and generation. The attempt to place worship at the central core of religion should not be interpreted as minimizing or deprecating theology, education, healing, social services, nor any of the essential handmaidens of religion. It is merely a matter of putting first things first....<sup>vii</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Skinner, Clarence Russell. *Worship and the Well Ordered Life*. Boston: Universalist Meeting House Press, 1955. p. 149.

<sup>ii</sup> Hall, Frank O. *Common People*. Boston: James H. West Co., 1901.

<sup>iii</sup> Call Number: bMS 446. Fourth Universalist Society of New York, Records, 1839-2001. Repository: Andover-Harvard Theological Library, Harvard Divinity School, 45 Francis Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138-1911.

<sup>iv</sup> bMS 434/3. Clarence Russell Skinner Papers, 1906-1970. Biographical Articles about Skinner. (12) Scott, Clinton Lee. Untitled.

<sup>v</sup> Howe, Charles A. *Clarence R. Skinner: Prophet of a New Universalism*, p. 20.

<sup>vi</sup> Website: *A Brief History of the Community Church of Boston* by Rev. Peter T. Richardson; [www.commchurch.org/](http://www.commchurch.org/)

vii Worship and the Well-Ordered Life, p. 39.