

**“Our Debts to Universalists Clarence Skinner
and Clinton Lee Scott”
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There is a disconnect lurking in the title of this homily: “Our *Debts* to Universalists Clarence Skinner and Clinton Lee Scott.” I mean to pay tribute to them, to lift them up, and to appreciate them. I mean to stimulate your curiosity to learn more about them in the time to come. And what did I do? I linked them to the word “debt.” Big mistake!

Tea party conservatives square off against progressives around managing a crisis of debt. 70,000 protesters filled Capitol square in Madison, Wisconsin (my alma mater) refusing to hand over collective bargaining rights without a fight. Debt is swamping states and municipalities, and states of mind. A woman named Jennifer who did not reveal her last name wrote this poem entitled “If (owing a large debt to Kipling).”¹

If you can budget still when those about you
Are blowing theirs and blaming mass inflation,
If you can trust yourself when others doubt you,
Ignoring siren calls of fresh temptation,
If you can save and not be tired by saving,
By cutting back, by sticking to your plan,
Forgetting all those luxuries you’re craving,
And maximizing income if you can;

If you can stand – and not make debt your master,
If you can fight – make solvency your aim;
If you can meet with hardship and misgiving
And bravely overcome them just the same;
If you can bear to hear the real truth spoken,
Acknowledge that it’s time to take a stand,

¹ See <http://www.talkaboutdebt.co.uk/files/DebtFreePoems.pdf>.

Don't run away or let resolve be broken,
Don't let fear hide your head beneath the sand;

If you can seek the help to get you through this,
From charities whose job it is to guide,
From those who care enough to see you do this
And help you find the strength you'll need inside;
If you can work together with your lender,
Negotiate yourself a payment plan
And prove you're now a payer not a spender,
They might just meet you halfway if they can;

If you can keep your cool when things get hard,
Switch utilities to those who'll charge you less,
Pay more than just the minimum on cards,
You're on your way to getting out of this mess;
If you can do all this then know you're winning,
With every step you're closer to the end,
Your new resolve is only the beginning –
Just keep going – you'll be debt free, my friend.

Some debts are worth paying off as soon as possible. For example, paying the minimum amount on credit card debt is bound to bring a lifetime of misery. Some debts are worth paying off over a period of time. This morning, however, the focus is on debts that neither should be settled nor can be settled. We must not put these debts behind us but rather keep these debts in front of us.

I refer to our debts to Universalists Clarence Skinner and Clinton Lee Scott, who were both born in the 1880's. Clarence Skinner was born in 1881 and died in 1949 at age 68. Clinton Lee Scott lived to be 98 years old. He was born in 1887 and died in 1985. Each of these men had a vision of Universalism that was not confined to Christianity. True, Universalism began as a form of liberal Christianity, but by the mid 20th century in large part because of these men and those

influenced by these men, Universalism burst the seams of Christianity out of devotion to all of humanity.

Universalism began as the stance that a Christian's loving God would not condemn humans to hell; that is, eventually everyone would be united with the divine. Clarence Skinner and Clinton Lee Scott were "centaurs," so to speak, new creatures comprised of two seemingly incompatible parts. They were practical mystics. They were mystical practitioners of social justice whose lives spanned two world wars. They were pacifists, and they were rebuked for their pacifism by fellow Universalists and others.

How does a practical mystic live in the world? How does a mystical practitioner of social justice make a living and live a calling? Charles Howe writes that "All but ten of Scott's 56 years in the ministry were served in the parish."² He served congregations in Vermont, New York, Pennsylvania, Los Angeles (1923 – 1926), Georgia, Illinois, Ohio, and Massachusetts. He served the Universalist denomination in administration for 10 years, but after that Scott returned to parish work, serving the Universalist Church of Tarpon Springs, Florida, 1956-71.

How does a minister manage to serve congregations for 46 years? It boggles the mind of this person who has served congregations for 5.6 years. It probably takes a combination of factors, but I suspect one factor is this: Tenacious ministers develop a sense of humor and find loving ways to deliver strong, even pointed, messages to congregations. Clinton Lee Scott did just that in the parable of the Man That Came Empty Handed.³

Behold there cometh to the Master of the Temple a certain man that complaineth bitterly, saying On every Sabbath day do I come to the Temple: sometimes is my spirit renewed within me, but oftener do I come empty away. I ask for bread, and thou offerest me only a stone.

² See <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/clintonleescott.html>.

³ Parish Parables by Clinton Lee Scott, The Murray Press, Boston, 1946, page 9.

And the Master of the Temple asked him, saying, Though dost not come to the Temple expecting to be fed with bread each and every time thou comest? And the man answered, Nay, note every time that I come to the Temple. Then spake the Master of the Temple, saying, Thou hast the answer to thine own complaint, for only them that come each time with expectation, bringing with them their baskets, beareth away the bread of life. [pause]

According to Charles Howe, "Scott was a change agent in many areas of denominational and public life. As one of the few outspoken pacifists in the Universalist ministry, his views almost cost him his fellowship during World War I. As a social activist, he opposed racial segregation in Atlanta and, with great personal danger, a gambling syndicate in Peoria. As a religious thinker, he was the first prominent Universalist to embrace humanism, signing the Humanist Manifesto in 1933."⁴ He also helped start the Church of the Larger Fellowship, which was then a "church by mail," not by email.

Clinton Lee Scott's religious thinking evolved from liberal Christian, to Christian humanist, to global humanist . . . He wrote: "A true universalism in religion goes beyond Christian denominationalism and sees all religions of whatever time or place striving in imperfect ways to achieve a good life for man. . . . This is one world where all things of worth are sacred."

Clinton Lee Scott's parable of sticking out necks might have given comfort to fellow Universalist Clarence Skinner.⁵

Of Sticking Out Necks

It came to pass on a certain day that there cometh to the Master of the Temple an honest and upright man that had served the Temple with faithfulness for many years. Keepeth he the Law in his heart and executeth judgment in all things. And he was sorely troubled and spake unto the Master of the Temple saying, That which I do and speak pleaseth not the congregation; one complaineth of this and another of that, so that I know not how to be pleasing in the sight of men.

⁴ See <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/clintonleescott.html>.

⁵ Parish Parables, page 32.

Behold, I and the members of my household giveth of the best within us, yet do them we serve
case not to complain.

Ad the master of the Temple answereth, My son, I have been young, and now am old; yet have I
not seen a man escape the complaints of the multitude, except he be a nincompoop that doeth and
saith nothing. Go thou thy way in peace; blessed art though among men, for thou sticketh out
thy neck that the Lord hath given unto thee. [pause]

Now the focus changes to Clarence Skinner. He was born in Brooklyn into a Universalist
family. There were a number of Universalist ministers in his family tree.

Charles How notes that [in 1915] Skinner published *The Social Implications of Universalism*, an
interpretation of the Social Gospel that went well beyond the scope of Protestant Christianity. In
it, he offered an optimistic, socialistic vision of the "kingdom of heaven" to be established on
earth. This was the first comprehensive theological treatment of Universalism to appear in many
years, inspired a new interpretation of the church's mission, and established Skinner as a major
spokesperson for the denomination.⁶

After the U. S. entry into World War I, Skinner was criticized for his pacifist views. He lost a
ministry position because of his views, and he became very disillusioned. This was around the
time that he wrote the poem "In Times of Disillusionment," which we heard earlier in the
service. "In 1920 Skinner created a vehicle for pursuing his vision, the Community Church of
Boston, which was all-inclusive in its membership, and had no denominational ties."

In his final book, *Religion and a Well Ordered Life*, published posthumously in 1955, Skinner
wrote, "The difference between being broken and living a spiritually well ordered life cannot be
explained in terms of what happens to us. Things and events do not break us. We go to pieces
because we bring to life a breakable philosophy. If we bring to crises a habitual attitude of quiet
thinking and unfrightened adequacy, we can meet the most devastating experiences and still

⁶ See <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/clarencerussellskinner.html>.

maintain our integrity.”⁷ The UUA press that prints books on Unitarian Universalism is called Skinner House in his honor.

Look at the sweep of their lives! We are indebted to Clarence Skinner and to Clinton Lee Scott. They faced disillusionment and did not surrender. They remained Universalists and helped its embrace extend its comfort zone. They did not live in a dream world. They labored to build the world of their dreams. They loved fallible people, people like us. I conclude with a final parable by Clinton Lee Scott, *Of the Woman That Complaineth of the Air*.⁸

Now a certain woman cometh unto the Fair City that is beside the Great Sea that she might refresh herself, and be healed by the air of the salt sea. And every morning did she ride forth in her shining chariot through the crooked streets of the Fair City that is beside the Great Sea. And as often as she rideth abroad she complaineth of the air, saying, The city stinketh of fish, and I like it not.

And it came to pass that on a day the servant of the woman did wash the chariot in which she rideth. Maketh he it clean on the outside, and on the inside. And behold, the servant findeth under the seat of the chariot a basket of fish that the husband of the woman had placed there at some former time. And when this was told to the Master of the Temple he pondereth, So it is with many that complaineth of a stinking world, for they do carry with them in their chariots that which giveth offense. [pause]

May we carry with us in our chariots not stinking fish but the perfume of an open heart, a keen mind, and commitment to work toward greater social justice. May good humor brighten our days and sweeten the truths that we tell each other. May it be so!

⁷ *The Essential Clarence Skinner: A Brief Introduction to His Life and Writings*, Charles Howe, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2005, p. 102.

⁸ *Parish Parables*, p. 35.