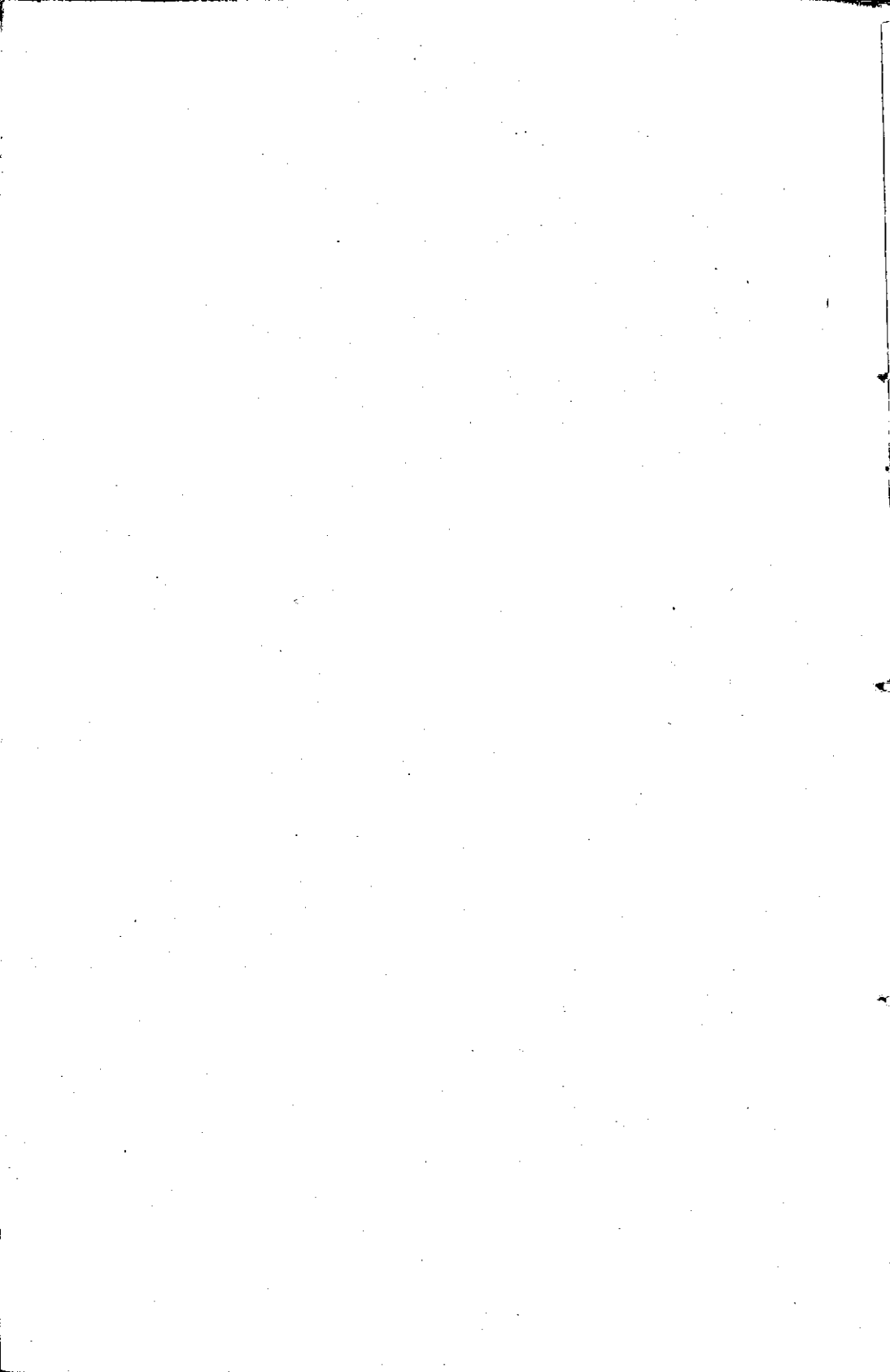


**CLARENCE SKINNER
PROPHET
OF
TWENTIETH CENTURY UNIVERSALISM**

by

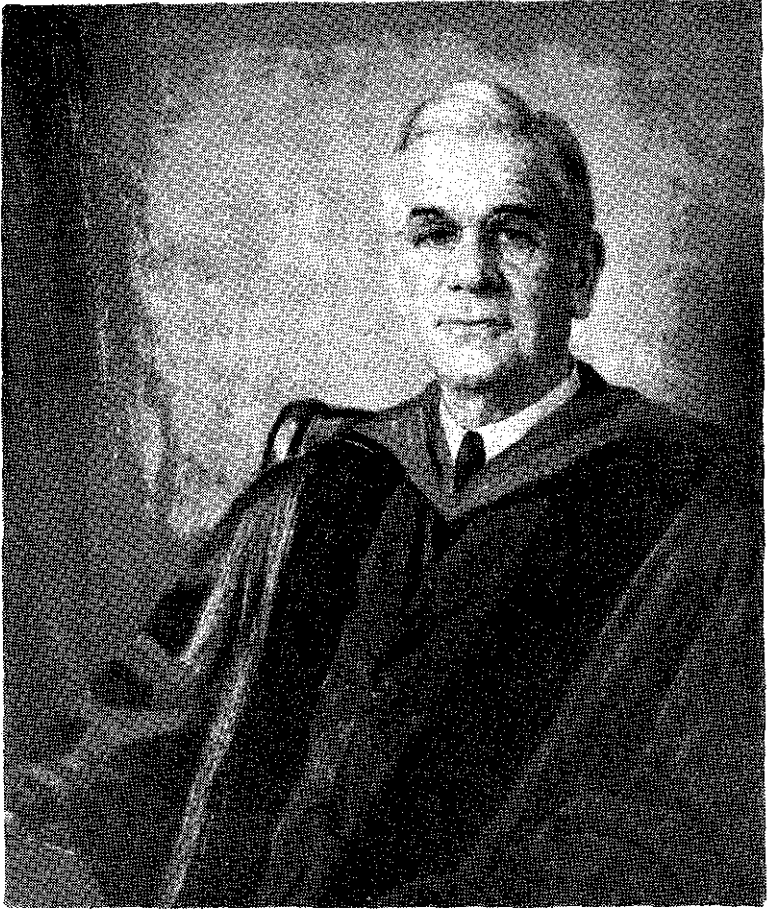
ALFRED STORER COLE



Clarence Skinner
Prophet
of
Twentieth Century Universalism

by
Alfred Storer Cole

UNIVERSALIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Portrait of Dean Skinner

IT IS an almost impossible assignment to imprison in cold type the color, glow and meaning of the life of Clarence Skinner. One must reach back into the archives of memory and pull out a recollection here and an anecdote t h e r e. Conversations must be recalled, books and addresses must be read, those unspoken, silent influences radiating from his spirit must be recaptured. The impact of his ever-youthful mind upon college youth must be weighed. Then all of these must be fitted into some kind of a picture — that we may better see and appreciate this magnificent person who lived and moved among us.

I will warn you at the beginning — because of my long years of association with Clarence Skinner, as a student, a friend, and a co-worker in Tufts College — that I am bound to be more or less biased in the picture which I shall draw. Long ago, I ceased to expect perfection in any man or woman. I know we all have feet of clay — and that lesson learned through the years may help me to be *honest* and *realistic*.

If you will take the trouble to “peg in” almost anywhere along the way in the history of the Universalist Church, roughly speaking since the 1830’s, you will find a Skinner occupying a prominent place or rendering valuable service in the cause of liberal religion. The name is in the van of those preachers, executives, artists, writers, and *teachers who have fought for freedom in religion and liberal education*.

Call the roll, if you will: — *Warren Skinner*, vigorous fighter for Universalism in an earlier day; *Otis Ainsworth Skinner*, preacher, executive, and leader in helping to give Tufts College a decent financial start in 1855; *Charles M. Skinner*, editor of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, author, critic and lecturer; *Otis Skinner*, prominent actor; *Cornelia Otis Skinner*, actress and

author, and many others of this amazing family who, in one way or another, have contributed so much to our liberal religious heritage.

It seems as if a great deal of the richness of character and intellect of this fine family were concentrated in the life of Clarence Skinner.

The Man

Clarence Russell Skinner was born in Brooklyn, N. Y. in 1881. He was the son of Charles M. Skinner, editor of *The Brooklyn Eagle*, and Ada B. Skinner. His childhood was spent pretty much in Brooklyn. Many of the father's characteristics, ways of thinking, and attitudes, appeared in later years in the son's life. In so many ways Charles Skinner was a very remarkable man. As editor of the *Eagle* he won the respect and affection of the reporters and editorial writers on the big New York newspapers and all over the country, as well. He loved and read *Homer* aloud to his two boys, Clarence and Harold. The old rebels, Emerson and Thoreau, were his constant companions in his rambles through the city streets and in the country. He championed Walt Whitman when that poet's writings were considered to be smutty and unclean. This outdoor poet, in particular, inspired him with an intense love of nature. Amid the busy life of an active journalist, he found time to write nine books and at least three plays.

So many of the fine qualities of the father can be found in the son — an intense *love of nature and music* — *independence of spirit* — *a stubborn honesty* — *and a great sympathy for the under-dog*.

In his book, *Do-nothing Days*, Charles Skinner expressed his individualism in this manner:

If Socialism is ever accomplished, what are we tramps and hermits and dreamers and rebels and scribblers to do? For, be assured, we shall not

submit to any worse slavery of law and custom than society tries to put upon us now. I care not a rap for the glory of a country that will not allow me to live my own life. Liberty is the first glory of all lands — liberty to live for happiness: liberty to buy it cheap!

As a lad Clarence attended the Erasmus Hall High School, and there his talents found an outlet in debating and acting. He was a good student, very serious in everything he did. In fact this seriousness and inability to relax were characteristic of him throughout his life, and often prevented people from understanding him. Unlike his father, he never was able to attain smoking-room cordiality with other people, especially if he did not know them well. As a kindly critic stated it — "I never saw Clarence really let go!"

In 1900 he began his studies at St. Lawrence University. His was the first class to enter under the new president, Dr. Almon Gunnison. While in college, he continued his interest in dramatics, becoming the president of the dramatic society. He was a member of the debating team, president of the class of 1904, editor of the college paper, active in the Canton Universalist Church and a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

While in college, he decided that acting was to be his life-work. Later he changed to the profession of the ministry, although he never graduated from a theological school. Just why he made this shift I cannot say, although the blood of the actor and the clergyman were in his illustrious family.

On leaving college in 1904, Clarence accepted a position as assistant minister to Dr. Frank Oliver Hall of The Church of the Divine Paternity, New York City. Here he came in constant contact not only with the machinery of a parish church, but also with both the seamy and cultural sides of the life in a great city. He preached occasionally in several of the Brook-

lyn churches, and filled The Divine Paternity pulpit in the absence of Dr. Hall.

In 1906 there were two important events which gave direction and stability to his life. He was ordained to the Universalist ministry in The Church of the Divine Paternity, and he married Clara L. Ayres, of Stamford, Connecticut, whom he met for the first time as an undergraduate in St. Lawrence. Through all the years which stretched ahead, Mrs. Skinner, in her quiet, persuasive way, was to be a tower of strength and a constant inspiration in times of danger and trial.

Dr. Skinner's first parish was in Mount Vernon, N. Y. (1906-1910). While there he spent a considerable amount of time in the New York settlement houses. Seeing the way the "other half lived" in the crowded and filthy tenements of a great city, with the attendant vice and crime, he was literally baptized into the "social gospel." Then and there a spirit of revolt was born in him that never died out during his entire lifetime. It was during his pastorate at Mt. Vernon that Clarence Skinner called together the first meeting of the New York ministers, which later became known as The Church Peace Union.

In 1910 he left Mount Vernon, after having built a fine new church edifice, and went to the Grace Universalist Church in Lowell, Mass. During his four years in that city, he established the first church forum in New England. He brought to its platform many of the outstanding leaders of thought in the fields of religion, politics and economics. Varied types of subjects were discussed, from religious and literary problems, to contemporary political movements. These forum meetings were tremendously successful and drew capacity audiences.

It so happened that Dr. Lee S. McCollester, then Dean of Crane Theological School, was scheduled to speak on one of the Sunday forum programs. He be-

came greatly attracted to this earnest young liberal, and soon after (1914) invited him to come to Tufts and teach the subject of Applied Christianity in the School of Religion.

The Teacher

Here began a most interesting and active period of Dr. Skinner's life. World War I had just started. The clouds of fear and suspicion descended on college campuses, Tufts included. Many of the academic leaders became panicky. True to his pacifistic leanings, he could not honestly support the war, and because of the simple, direct honesty which characterized all that he said and did, he met with a great deal of persecution and misunderstanding. Those were hectic days for the young professor of Applied Christianity, for along with Jane Addams of Hull House fame, and many other fearless leaders, he was publicly listed as a pacifist. All too many of his brother ministers gave him a wide berth and the professors on the Hill, with a few exceptions, shunned him. This is only a mild indication of what he went through during those hysterical years.

In spite of the fact that this young liberal nearly lost his teaching position, he held fast to his convictions until the hysteria abated and many of his ideas about the war were vindicated. As a student, sitting in his classes, I had a pretty clear idea of the gruelling experiences Dr. and Mrs. Skinner passed through, and the bitter loneliness they felt because of the attitude of his fellow ministers and professors.

Thus in a period of unprecedented hysteria and hatred began a teaching ministry which lasted until his retirement. *Throughout it all he never once lowered his banners or compromised his convictions.* All of which goes to show that Clarence Skinner was a very stubborn man when once his mind was made up as to the rightness of his cause.

As a student who entered Tufts College at the time when Dr. Skinner started his teaching career, and as one who took every course he gave during the undergraduate period, I might be fairly well-qualified to discuss his methods of teaching. He was first, last and always the teacher, whether in the Community Church pulpit, the college classroom, or the occasional address and sermon.

He had the uncanny ability of clarifying ideas. Whatever the subject happened to be, *Comparative Religions*, *Applied Christianity* or *Religious Biography*, he approached it from all sides, analyzed it clearly and then, without forcing his conclusions, laid it out before the student that he might choose for himself — what he considered to be the truth or the best course to pursue. One was never in doubt as to what the teacher himself thought.

The zeal, dedication and downright honesty of the man were a continual source of inspiration as well as knowledge. He commanded the respect of all his students, because they knew he had mastered his subject and thought his way through to his own conclusions concerning poverty, the curse of war, or a hundred other subjects.

That this may not seem to be just my over-enthusiastic statement, let me quote a few lines from a letter received by Dr. Skinner during World War II from one of his former students (not a theological student by the way) in a New Guinea foxhole.

"New Guinea, May 28, '45.

"If you remember, I was a member of the class of '33 and I took courses with you in introductory sociology and race problems. Of all the professors under whom I have studied, I think you are the one who made the greatest imprint and who gave me . . . some of the first lessons in humanism and liberalism. You are one of the most tolerant, pa-

tient and righteous men I have had the pleasure of knowing . . . The two most important contributions that you gave me were your steadfast and beautiful concept of *peace* and the strong desire to aid in any sensible and worthwhile housing project. With the coming of 'peace' in this torn world again, municipalities in keeping with the promise of the future may do more in the way of building housing projects. This will be a monument to your foresight and greatness."

This is effective teaching, and yet in his modesty, Dr. Skinner had thrown that letter away, one among many others, which crystallized in cameo-like clarity the power and effectiveness of his teaching and the contagious influence of his personality on the minds of youth.

He taught in Tufts College School of Religion until his retirement as Dean in 1945, and many a man in our liberal ministry today (Universalist and Unitarian) can testify to the tremendous impact this modest, humble teacher made upon his thinking and his attitude toward the liberal ministry. He, himself, was the student always. Continually searching, pressing forward toward new goals, youthful in spirit, forever the liberal, uncompromising and honest in his own convictions.

During his teaching career every spare half-hour or free period was used to polish off a chapter for some book he was preparing for publication, or writing notes in his bold long-hand scrawl for a sermon, address, or Phi Beta Kappa oration. He was an indefatigable worker and never really learned the art of relaxation.

In 1920, with the efficient help of Mrs. Gertrude Winslow, Mrs. Skinner, and John Haynes Holmes, Dr. Skinner founded the Community Church of Boston. He served as its leader for the next fifteen years. Far-reaching and unique has been the work done by

this great liberal institution in the city of Boston during the past thirty-five years. As in the case of his Smaller Forum in Lowell, he brought to its platform world-renowned speakers on a great variety of subjects, permeating the life of the city and New England as well, with liberal ideas concerning religion, politics, world affairs, war and peace and personal religious problems. No controversial topic was too hot to handle, for in the blunt give and take of the forum question period all sides were presented in varying degrees of oratorical skill, and all grievances aired.

During his teaching years (1914-1945), it seemed as if Dr. Skinner always had a book in the offing. In fact he was generally working on two or three manuscripts pretty much at the same time. One of his earlier works was *The Social Implications Of Universalism* — a formal review of the impact of Universalism on the social evils of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Other volumes are *Liberalism Faces the Future* (1937); *Human Nature and the Nature of Evil* (1939); and then in 1941, in collaboration with this writer, *Hell's Ramparts Fell — a Life of John Murray; A Religion For Greatness* (1945) and the last book (in manuscript form at the time of his death) *Worship and the Well Ordered Life* (1955). This manuscript was arranged and printed by Kenneth Patton on the Charles Street Press and sponsored by the Universalist Historical Society. This is about the only book at the present time which deals with the problems of worship in the liberal church.

Time and space prevent detailed analysis of these books. They should be read now in the light of present day events. Many of the chapters are written in a language which is too academic and repetitious, but the ideas and philosophy expressed represent the thinking and work of a great liberal idealist.

Prophet of Liberalism

In studying a man's life a few fundamental questions always arise. What are the forces, influences, people and events which mold his thinking and govern his actions? What is the source of his faith? Where did he find his inspiration and what are the springs of his religion?

Therefore, to get a clear picture of Clarence Skinner as the prophet of Liberalism, we must seek answers to the above questions. It goes without saying that *his sources of power and his passion for this social gospel were rooted in many soils.*

He based his faith on the broad, liberal concepts of *the brotherhood of man*. Many of the old injustices must be removed, *wars* must be outlawed, and the great principles underlying the Universalist faith must be *put to work* in building better cities, eliminating social injustice, and rooting out the vicious evils which make for war. In order to do all this the old *partialisms* (a word often on the lips of the pioneer Universalists) must go. The best in all the great world religions must be utilized to build a decent world and topple the moss-covered wall of intolerance.

Then again his soul caught fire from the spirit and the enthusiasms of the Yankee reformers of the late nineteenth century, this "long line of men and women in western civilization" as one writer states, "who have fixed their eyes on 'what *ought* to be'; to supply the *community with a tension that real religion gives to the truly religious person, between what one is and what one ought to be.*"

The mantle of Walter Rauschenbusch had fallen on Clarence Skinner's shoulders — the mantle of *The Social Gospel*. The basic underlying idea in all this was that human nature is not static and fixed. *It can be changed* — and one way to do it is to eliminate these ancient evils which men considered to be fixed

and eternal. *They are not!!* They can be removed. Man, weak, wayward creature that he is, *can* stand up, shake off his chains and walk erect and free, if he will!

These chains, however, cannot be broken by the old method of violence and bloodshed. Clarence Skinner's way was grounded in the New Testament (The Sermon On The Mount in particular), the teaching of Leo Tolstoi, and the life and disciplines of Mahatma Gandhi, whom he almost worshipped. *He knew full well that in order to break chains with these tools one must be self-disciplined, with lean, hard, mental muscles and more than all else, a great love for people.*

Our blasé generation, shaken to its foundations by the cindery rubble of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the horror of the Nazi ovens, had better try to gain something of the insight and enthusiasm of this liberal prophet. He knew, only too well, the weaknesses of human nature as he painted his vivid picture of *what ought to be* with the somewhat watery pigments of *what is*.

Clarence Skinner was a *Mystic* in the truest sense of that much abused word. His mysticism was the wellspring of all that he thought and did. Perhaps it can best be explained in his own words:

If there is anything which ought to be distinctive of religion, it is a feeling of active relationship between the self and a mystic *other*, better world. There is no reason why this sense of relationship should be confined to a hazy realm which the soul visits after death. *Can there not be a social and political mysticism which calls forth an eager faith? Can we not visualize another better world which is not yet real, but is capable of becoming a reality? The old mysticism was individualistic. The other mysticism would*

contain a diviner urge and lay upon man a sense of something great to be done!

It is reported that one of the saints of the early church sang and preached along the road from Asia Minor to Rome, where he awaited certain martyrdom; and while on that journey he wrote to his friends that he longed to feel the teeth of the Lion sink into his flesh so that he might bear witness of his faith. He knew that he was going to that mystic, better world beyond death, and he went to it with triumph. *Would that we of today might go to that mystic other-world of the new era of reconstruction with something of that spirit.* Not to die for it as the saint of old, nor to kill for it, as does the soldier, *but to live for it — to live splendidly, with utter devotion.*

This social mysticism, far from being just a pretty philosophy, was for Clarence Skinner as magnificent and compelling as any which illumined the minds of the saints and prophets of old. *It was, for him, the very breath of life!*

I know he is indeed a rash person who even tries to speak for another. Nevertheless this query comes to mind, — if we could hear his vibrant voice today, what do you suppose he would say to us? In view of what I know of Dr. Skinner's outlook and his type of thinking, it might be something like this! "Nourish the prophetic spirit! In all this important business of wheels turning within wheels, amid the work of stream-lining denominational machinery — *never let the lure of numbers, money-drives, or outward success or flattery conceal or dim the real purpose of the Liberal Church.* It must sustain and nourish the prophet, the protest-ants — those sensitive souls whose lives mirror the picture of a new and better day, and whose hard, biting words strike fire within our hearts.

"This is the glory of the Liberal Church that in spite of the smallness of pigmy minds, *it has fathered and mothered the prophets*. When it ceases to do that, it deserves to die!" And if I know Clarence Skinner, he might add this admonition, "and what are you, students in my classes, my friends and admirers, doing today to carry on this prophetic ministry? Has my voice died out upon the wind, or do you still hear it sounding in your hearts? Where are the liberal prophets in a day of fear, hydrogen bombs and a time of pathetic hunger for peace? What is your answer?"

Our liberal prophet penetrated to the center of the issues facing our generation, when he tried his best to expand and enrich the meaning and content of that magnificent name which we are labelled — Universalism. As Norman Cousins stated it, "The vast test for the world's great religions is — can religion act in behalf of the human family at a time when it is in dire danger. How important is man anyway?"

It took the cosmos more than two billion years to create the conditions for producing and sustaining human life, but it could take human intelligence less than a day to bring it down about our ears. Too much of our religion has merely become one of the values we fight for, instead of a *vital force itself leading the way toward a better world*.

In the last article Dr. Skinner ever wrote for the *Leader* (June 19, 1948), "The World of Tomorrow — Who? — What? — When? — How?" a skillful analysis, he concluded with these paragraphs:

"We need spiritual giants in the earth who dare to break the shackles of the past; creative, onward-looking pioneers, who dare to go forward.

"We need a new philosophy which repudiates the old entrenched selfishness and exclusiveness of the past and which proclaims a more ample life for the growing spirit of man.

"We must find new instruments for solving our problems; no longer the bludgeoning of the axe, but the effective methods of understanding and cooperation.

"Above all, we must move forward now!

Forward!

From Superstition to Reason;
From Authoritarianism to Freedom;
From Partialism to Universalism;
From Individualism to Socialism;
From Indifference to Conviction;
From Fear to Faith—
From Disorder to Discipline—
From Anarchy to Organization—
From War to Peace—"

I shall not say much about Clarence Skinner's death. There is no need, for it is too close to us! (Aug. 26, 1949.) All I have to do is to use the magic of imagination and memory, and I can see those deep-set, clear blue eyes and the wry little smile crack the corners of his mouth.

In the last analysis, who can sum up the man and personality we call Clarence Skinner? Who can say that this person making an impassioned speech on the subject of world peace, is the man? Is this vivacious lecturer, analyzing some controversial social problem before a class of young men and women, the person? Is this student, writing chapters for a book in the quiet of his study, the man? *Is this Clarence Skinner?* Could it be the man, sensitive to his finger tips to the music and beauty of the world, writing poems concerning the haunting mystery and pain of life, *is this the individual?* Is this stubborn, unyielding prophet, with soul on fire against the evils of the world which maim and debase human nature, *is this Clarence Skinner?*

You know the answer! No one of these can sum up the charm, honesty, and sincerity, and courage of the man we know as Clarence Skinner! Perhaps we had better not try to define him. The attempt will fail anyway. *Let's be glad he lived, that for a little while we were privileged to walk the way with him, and feel the kindling glow of his presence and the inspiration of his dreams of a better world. The question remains, do we, in our day and generation, dare to be such men as he?*

William Shakespeare, in a passage found near the close of his drama "Julius Caesar," sums up the idea I wish to leave with you. It is so simple and direct that it fits Clarence Skinner perfectly:

"His life was gentle; and the elements so mixed in him, that nature might stand up, and say to all the world, 'This was a man!'"

About Alfred Storer Cole

Alfred Storer Cole served from 1931 to 1955 as a member of the faculty of Crane Theological School of Tufts University. He was thus a longtime, intimate, professional associate and friend of Dean Skinner. Professor Cole's memoir of the life and philosophy of Clarence Skinner is a true labor of love. The text of this perceptive essay was originally prepared for and read at the one hundred and twenty-first annual meeting of the Universalist Historical Society, August 24, 1955.

