

SUMMARY
BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

THIRST

BY SCOTT HARRISON



Summary of Thirst by Scott Harrison

Written by Alyssa Burnette

One man's journey to bring clean water to the world.

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Introduction

Scott Harrison was not the typical saint you envision when you think about someone who starts a global charity. Before he started his nonprofit called “charity: water,” he was a nightclub promoter in New York City. In fact, prior to launching “charity: water,” Scott often said that getting wasted every night was his job-- and it really was! As a nightclub promoter, Scott was the face of NYC’s best nightlife; it was literally his job to show other people how much fun they could have in these establishments. So, Scott partied every single night. He consumed ten or more alcoholic drinks on average. He smoked three packs of cigarettes a day and regularly used illegal drugs such as MDMA and Cocaine.

But although these habits are often frowned upon when they’re seen in poor people of color, Scott’s wild lifestyle was extremely profitable. Bacardi and Budweiser both paid him \$2,000 to consume their alcohol in public. In addition to this fun little sponsorship detail, he made \$200,000 as a full-time club promoter who convinced people to pay \$500 for a \$20 bottle of vodka. Recreational drugs and heavy drinking quite literally paid Scott’s bills! As a result, he struggled to be honest when filling out paperwork for doctor’s appointments that required him to answer questions about his lifestyle! But one doctor’s appointment provided a massive wake-up call for Scott. When he began to experience inexplicable numbness and tingling in his arms, Scott feared the worst. He sought out neurologists and specialists in his desperate search for answers. And when he struggled to receive these answers from medical professionals, he turned to the internet in a desperate attempt to self-diagnose.

Frantic Google searches for “numbness” turned up religious articles which inquired about spiritual numbness. And as he read, Scott was reminded of his deeply conservative Christian childhood. This reminder prompted him to wonder what would happen if he died-- and then another question hit him like a suckerpunch. If he died today, would he be proud of his life? Would he be proud of the way people remembered him? Even before he admitted it to himself, Scott knew the answer was no. And that was when he asked himself

the question that would change his life forever: what would the complete opposite of my life look like? This is the story of how Scott acted on that life-changing vision and made the world a better place.



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Scott's Early Life

It's probably pretty safe to say that most kids who grow up in a conservative Christian home don't grow up to become nightclub promoters. But rebellion motivated Scott to cultivate a life that differed from his childhood as much as possible. Although Scott did not have an abusive or exceptionally repressive childhood, he did feel at odds with his parents' Christian values. He didn't like going to Christian school and he felt disconnected at church. In fact, his animosity for organized religion was so strong that he demanded his parents enroll him in a local public school instead! Surprisingly, Scott got his wish and this marked the first step in his path to rebellion.

An early talent for playing the piano motivated him to form a band called Sunday River with some friends in high-school. In addition to his role as the band's lead keyboard player, Scott soon found that he was also gifted when it came to socialization and promotion. Because he was passionate about the band, he was eager to help his group get as many opportunities as they could. So, he distributed fliers, called venues to book gigs, and promoted the band to every nightclub who would listen to him. But as you might imagine, all that promotion could quickly turn into a full-time job! And in fact, it occupied so much of Scott's time that he barely had a spare moment to attend his high-school classes. When he finally did graduate, it was by the skin of his teeth, and he wouldn't be getting any scholarships for college. But he had accomplished his real goal: landing an opportunity for his band to record a demo.

The band seemed like it was going to take off and become the next musical sensation, so Scott rebelled once again, rejecting his parents' dreams for him to go to college. He moved to New York City with his bandmates, taking any job he could find to pay the bills, and eventually made some connections in the nightclub and music scene. It wasn't long before Scott decided that he felt at home on the dance floor and he pursued any opportunity that would help him stay connected to the club scene. Thanks to his persistence, talent, and winsome personality, nightclub owners soon realized that Scott was different from every other kid who moved to New York to make it big. They began to

pay him for his work promoting their nightclubs and give him small responsibilities like managing the guest lists and bringing fun people to events. And the rest, as they say, is history.



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Scott's Transformation

Scott had worked hard to make his dreams come true in New York. But after several years passed, he realized that life at the top was more boring and unfulfilling than he could have imagined. He learned that there was only so much fun you could have with drugs, alcohol, and an endless parade of fashion models to have sex with. He had money, good looks, and fame, but it all felt meaningless. And that tingling in his arm was really getting concerning... As the constant sensation of pins and needles wore on, Scott couldn't shake the feeling that he needed to re-evaluate his life choices. Maybe his parents had been onto something after all. Maybe it was time to reconnect with the faith he had grown up in.

As Scott wrestled with this question, he listened to audiobooks about the Bible and about spiritual issues in the Christian faith. Try as he might to ignore them, he felt that these resources were more meaningful than his life in the nightclub scene could ever hope to be. So, in the end, he felt there was only one choice to make: he needed to leave the nightclub scene altogether and create a life that was the opposite of everything he was doing now. After careful reflection, Scott decided that that life should follow Jesus' example of abandoning your riches and serving the poor. So, he decided to donate his time to any charitable cause that would have him. Although he sent out applications to multiple well-known charities, he only heard back from one: the Mercy Ships program. At the time, Scott wondered if this was the right path for him, but he soon found out that it was the perfect fit.

If you haven't heard of Mercy Ships, their website defines their mission in the following manner: "Mercy Ships is an international charity which operates the largest non-governmental hospital ships in the world, providing humanitarian aid like free health care, community development projects, community health education, mental health programs, agriculture projects, and palliative care for terminally ill patients." Although Scott had no medical training to offer, he did have one skill that Mercy Ships desperately needed: his ability to connect with others and promote a cause. Mercy Ships accepted him as a volunteer because they needed a communications expert who could

spread awareness about their work. Although living on a converted ocean liner was a far cry from his penthouse in New York City, Scott felt certain that this was where he needed to be. He had no idea just how true that would be.



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Charity Water

In an interview with renowned author and speaker Brene Brown, Scott explained his transformation-- and the origin of charity: water-- in his own words by stating:

“My time with Mercy Ships truly changed my life. I saw extreme poverty for the first time, living in a broken war-torn country that had no running water, sewage system or electricity. I was horrified to see children drinking water from leech- and bacteria-infested ponds and swamps they shared with animals. Living aboard a medical ship, I was fully immersed in the work of the doctors and surgeons, and I quickly saw the connection between many of the diseases they were treating and the contaminated water sources I’d seen on land. At the time, 50% of everyone living in Liberia was drinking dirty water. With a little research, I discovered that dirty water, poor sanitation and lack of hygiene are responsible for half of all disease in developing nations. It’s also responsible for more death in the world than all forms of violence, including war. I couldn’t believe something that we took for granted back home in the US was ruining so many lives.

I wasn’t sure how I was going to do it, but I knew I had to help. I felt a strong sense of responsibility to do something about the injustice I’d seen. When I came back to New York, I started charity: water to raise funds and awareness for fixing a problem that was completely solvable with the right resources. Twelve years later, we’ve raised more than \$320 million with the support of over one million people from 100 countries. And our incredible community continues to grow and make an impact on the lives of millions more around the world.”

That, in a nutshell, is what charity: water does and how Scott’s mission has impacted the world. But a closer, more intimate look will reveal the lasting personal impact that charity: water has had on real people who

needed help. One of the most powerful stories that touched Scott's heart is the story of a 13-year-old girl named Letikiros, who was born in the Ethiopian village of Meda. In a recent blog post on his personal page, Scott told Letikiros' story in his own words, writing that, "It was still dark and cool when 13-year-old Letikiros walked out the door to get water. She never came home. At 4 p.m. a man found her lifeless body swinging from a tree, a rope tied around her neck.

Meda is a large village of dust and rocks that sits on an Ethiopian plateau and sprawls from north to south over several miles. A steep gorge 100 stories deep cuts the village in half, with treacherous dirt footpaths snaking up and down both sides of the mountains, connecting the two sides. Arliew Spring, one of the village's sources for water, is at the bottom of the gorge. There's no bank in Meda, no post office, and no general store. There are no power lines or cellular towers. There's no place to buy a Coke, a bottle of water, or AA batteries. A dozen eggs costs only six cents and while they are small, they are most certainly organic. Most of Letikiros' time was spent walking and waiting for water. Her first walk for water occurred when she was 8 years old, and her life would change forever after that moment. She'd now get up early four days a week, grab her clay pot, tie it to her back with a rope, and head to the water source to do her part for the family.

Arliew Spring was the closest source to home, but it involved a dangerous and steep climb down a 700-foot cliff. The rocks were loose and slippery, and women had been known to fall to their death on this path. Once at the dry ravine at the bottom, Letikiros would have to scramble up over giant rocks to reach the spring, which wasn't much of a spring at all. Only enough water seeped out of the rock to fill a few clay pots every hour, and the source was shared at night by monkeys, whose excrement surrounded the area."

Scott's words paint a vivid picture of the extremely difficult life young Letikiros led. Her life was vastly different from Scott's in New York and

likely very different from that of most people who will read her story. So, after surviving all of those hardships, after enduring so much just to access a vital human resource like water, what brought Letikiros' young life to such an abrupt end? Although many young girls in Meda are victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, and disease, none of these terrible things caused Letikiros' death. Instead, her death-- just like her life-- hinged on the pursuit of that all important resource: water. One evening, after a conversation with her friend at the Arliew Spring, Letikiros took her own life. In Scott's blog post, he observes that she had already collected the water that necessitated her long and arduous journey. She was on her way home. So, why would she take her own life? Scott explained in his blog post by writing:

“No one will ever know exactly what went through the mind of Letikiros in the moments that followed. What is known, is that she somehow slipped and fell, smashing her clay pot full of water into small pieces. She must have watched in horror as the water spilled out on the dusty ground and abruptly considered the harsh reality of her situation. More than 10 hours of walking and waiting had been undone through a simple misstep.

Those who knew her well believed she must have been overcome with shame.

She knew her mother and sister were at home waiting for the water. She knew they needed her water to cook dinner. And now, even the clay pot was destroyed — a valuable asset for the family. So, rather than continue home down the path empty handed, the 13-year-old child slipped the rope from the pot through the branches of a tree, then around her neck and hung herself.”

For Scott, Letikiros' story highlighted the absolute necessity of his work with charity: water. Contrasting his life in New York with that of this innocent little girl in Ethiopia, he felt that nothing could be more important than ensuring that no child met Letikiros' fate in the future. No

child should feel so ashamed because of their lack of water. So, Scott visited Letikiros' village and walked her daily water route himself. He wanted to see what her life had been like and really understand what people went through when they did not have access to water. Today, Scott says that Letikiros' story is the pulse of his work with charity: water. He continues his work not just because it's the right thing to do, not just because it brings him purpose and fulfilment, but because he wants to honor Letikiros' legacy and save other children just like her. His hope is that charity: water will continue to grow and offer opportunities for young girls like Letikiros to pursue an education and avoid this dangerous trek for water. And he won't stop until he makes that happen.



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Final Summary

Scott Harrison's story is all about thirst. Although he was originally driven by his own thirst for rebellion, freedom, and independence, he eventually realized that there was something much more important than pursuing the glamorous life of a nightclub promoter in New York City. When confronted with the real thirst of real people who longed for access to clean drinking water, Scott realized that he had found his calling.

By pursuing a faith relationship with Jesus and dedicating his life to serving others, Scott found meaning and fulfilment. After volunteering with the charity Mercy Ships, Scott was inspired to create his own charity dedicated to providing access to clean drinking water. Today, charity: water is a global organization that works tirelessly to save children like Letikiros and make the world a better place.



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