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Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

Thirst

A Story of Redemption, Compassion, and
a Mission to Bring Clean Water to the World

by Scott Harrison

Contribution by Lisa Sweetingham

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“*Thirst* is a story about all of us. In sharing his own remarkable journey, Scott shows us how to find the extraordinary in the ordinary, how to find hope in despair, and how simple acts of generosity can transform everything from what we believe about ourselves to how we connect with each other. In the end, *Thirst* is about what matters most. Love.”

—Brené Brown, Ph.D., author of *Braving the Wilderness*

about the book

At twenty-eight years old, Scott Harrison had it all. A top nightclub promoter in New York City, his life was an endless cycle of drugs, booze, models—repeat. But ten years in, desperately unhappy and morally bankrupt, he asked himself, “What would the exact opposite of my life look like?” Walking away from everything, Harrison spent the next sixteen months on a hospital ship in West Africa and discovered his true calling. In 2006, with no money and less than no experience, Harrison founded charity: water. Today, his organization has raised over \$300 million to bring clean drinking water to more than 8.2 million people around the globe.

In *Thirst*, Harrison recounts the twists and turns that built charity: water into one of the most trusted and admired nonprofits in the world. Renowned for its 100% donation model, bold storytelling, imaginative branding, and radical commitment to transparency, charity: water has disrupted how social entrepreneurs work while inspiring millions of people to join its mission of bringing clean water to everyone on the planet within our lifetime.

Thirst is a riveting account of how to build a better charity, a better business, a better life—and a gritty tale that proves it’s never too late to make a change.

about the author

Scott Harrison is the founder and CEO of charity: water, a non-profit that has mobilized over one million donors around the world to fund over 28,000 water projects in twenty-six countries that will serve more than 8.2 million people. Harrison has been recognized on *Fortune*’s 40 under 40 list, *Forbes*’ Impact 30 list, and was ranked #10 in *Fast Company*’s 100 Most Creative People in Business. He is currently a World Economic Forum Young Global Leader and lives in New York City with his wife and two children.

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→ discussion guide

1. As a child, why did Scott doubt that his mother's symptoms were real? Have you ever questioned someone's suffering because their symptoms were invisible? When an issue is not something we have personal experience with or is something that was previously invisible to us, how can we increase our understanding about the issue?
2. After moving to New York City, how did Scott gradually become what he describes as "the worst version of myself" (p. 47)? Have you ever felt a desire to make a significant change in your life? Were there factors that prevented you from taking action?
3. What were some of the challenges that doctors and volunteers working with Mercy Ships faced? How did Dr. Gary Parker inspire volunteers on the ship to provide everyone seeking medical care with attention and kindness? Have you ever been overwhelmed by a problem and the feeling that your actions were not enough? Were you able to overcome that feeling? Why or why not?
4. What is your reaction to Dr. Gary's message that "the hopes and dreams in a mother's heart are the same anywhere in the world" (p. 86)? Why did Dr. Gary believe that actions were more important than words? What are some of the challenges that children seeking care from Mercy Ships faced? Why is Mercy Ships not able to help everyone seeking medical care?
5. Why does Scott decide to break protocol and bring Harris back to the ship to have his facial tumor evaluated? How might the situation have been different if Harris' tumor was inoperable? Have you ever had to break the rules to do what you believed was the right thing?
6. How did Scott use storytelling to share his experiences volunteering with Mercy Ships? How did his gallery exhibition inspire others to donate their time and resources to people in need? Did the before and after pictures of patients included in the book impact your understanding of Mercy Ships' mission?
7. How did Scott's understanding of water poverty change after Lafe showed him a dirty water source in Liberia? Had you thought about water poverty prior to reading this book? Do you think we take access to clean water for granted? Why or why not?
8. What is the concept of "Africa Time"? Why did Dr. Gary call it "one of the greatest gifts his patients had given him" (p. 130)? Why did Scott struggle with Africa Time? What did it teach him about local leadership and culture? Why was it important for Scott to focus on one village and one well at a time?
9. Why did Scott and other volunteers experience a sense of culture shock after returning to Western countries following their time in Africa? Have you ever visited a place that is significantly different from the place where you live? Did you experience culture shock? Why or why not?
10. How did Scott react when he saw a three-year-old girl vomiting after drinking river water? How can witnessing something firsthand change how we think about an issue? Do you think we need to have a direct experience with an issue in order to care about it? Why or why not?
11. Why did Scott decide to build charity: water using a 100% donation model? Do you think this model helps to establish trust among donors? Why or why not? What challenges has charity: water faced because of this model? What other challenges did the organization face because of their rapid growth?

12. What challenges did Scott and his team face when drilling for water in the Central African Republic? Why did Scott believe it was important to be transparent with donors when they did not find water? How did he share this information? Why did charity: water promise to return for a fourth time to bring water to the Bayaka people? What risks did they take in making this promise?
13. How does charity: water encourage people to fundraise in creative ways? Would you consider donating your birthday to a charity? Why or why not?
14. What are some of the challenges that impact sustainability within the charitable water sector? How does charity: water invest in sustainability? What were some of the unanticipated challenges that charity: water faced?
15. How does limited access to clean water impact a person's daily choices? What factors did Helen Apio have to consider before deciding how to use her water? How can access to clean water impact a person's self-esteem? How have you used water today?
16. How did Rachel Beckwith's campaign become a global fundraiser? How did Scott and charity: water honor Rachel's legacy? Why did charity: water invite Rachel's mother, Samantha, to come to Ethiopia?
17. Why did a corporate donor file a civil suit against charity: water? Why was Scott afraid of how the suit would impact the organization's reputation? What did Scott and his team learn from the lawsuit? Describe a time that you learned from a mistake or error that you made.
18. How did you react to learning about Letikiros Hailu's story? Why did Scott feel it was important to travel to the village of Meda to learn more about her? Why was charity: water unable to provide a sustainable solution in Meda? Do you think the organization made the right choice? Why or why not?
19. How does charity: water communicate their organizational pillars of trust, proof, and inspiration? Which pillar resonates most with you? How does charity: water focus on opportunity instead of guilt?
20. Scott built a team of leaders, donors, and creative people, including his wife, Vik, who helped him to develop charity: water. How did Scott's team help him build a stronger organization? What did Scott learn about his personal strengths and his weaknesses? Describe a time in your life when you worked in a team to solve a problem.
21. How did Scott and his team connect donors in New York City to people living in a community in rural Ethiopia at their "Someone Like You" gala? Why do you think they chose this theme for the event?
22. Throughout the book, Scott shares examples of exceeding his fundraising goals. But he also shares examples of times when he fell short of his goals. Think of a time that you set a goal for yourself but did not meet it. How did you feel? How can being a member of a team help you to stay focused on your goals?
23. Scott's vision for charity: water was to "reinvent charity, to make giving a joyful experience, to bring donors back to the true meaning of love through acts of generosity and compassion" (p. 158). Do you think charity: water has accomplished this?
24. Scott writes, "My hope is that this book inspires greatness within you. And action" (p. 312). What is one issue that you care deeply about? How can you personally dedicate your time, talent, or resources to that issue?

• for further discussion and action

1. Visit thirstbook.com and enter the code “together.” Explore the photos and videos, and visit each content section from the book. Did your understanding of any of the stories in the book change once you reviewed the additional content?
2. Learn more about charity: water’s current work:
 - More on the global water crisis: charitywater.org/global-water-crisis
 - More on charity: water’s projects and partners: charitywater.org/projects
3. Watch some of the videos highlighted in *Thirst*:
 - charity: water’s first PSA: tiny.cc/waterpsa
 - Live drill in Central African Republic: tiny.cc/livedrill
 - Rachel Beckwith’s fundraising campaign and Sam Beckwith’s visit to Ethiopia: tiny.cc/ethiopiavisit
 - Charity: ball recap 2017: tiny.cc/charityball
 - Someone Like You: tiny.cc/someonevid
4. Learn more about the work of Mercy Ships: mercyships.org
5. Visit Scott’s archived website of images and stories from his time aboard the Mercy Ship Anastasis: onamercyship.com

• about this guide’s writer

RACHAEL ZAFER is the author of discussion guides for many books, including *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* by Bryan Stevenson, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* by Matthew Desmond. Rachael has led hundreds of creative and educational workshops in prisons and jails in Michigan, Illinois, and New York, was the founding director of the NYU Prison Education Program, and is a co-director of the Prison Arts Initiative at the University of Denver. Rachael holds an Executive MPA from New York University and a BA in English Language and Literature from the University of Michigan. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.



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