

In January of 1984 I was in seminary taking an **Interpersonal Relationship class** — a peer group learning experience designed to help ministers in exploring various personal and professional issues that may arise during their ministry. It was a Week long intensive and at the beginning of the class the professor very clearly said you must be here for all of the classes they start at 9 am and end at 4 pm. This is about group process and the whole group needs to be here. Any questions asked the professor. I raised my hand – umm I have tickets for a concert on Thursday I need to leave early. The professor started to say something that I assumed would be a negative and I continued My husband stood in line for 7 hours to get these tickets ... The professor closed her mouth.

That Thursday we arrived at the Veteran's stadium parking lot in Philadelphia to find a church revival atmosphere with soft pretzel vendors, t-shirt stands, recordings of past "sermons" playing at full volume from every other car. It was church on the Boardwalk at the Jersey Shore. You may think it strange for somebody studying for the ministry to attend such an event, but I really wanted to be there. I was dying to hear this man preach. So were the thousands of my fellow pilgrims, tailgating before the service.

How can this preacher be the most popular theologian in America? He never graduated from a seminary. He pastors no church. He doesn't have a weekly televangelism program, nor has he written any popular religious books such as *The Purpose Driven Life*. He is, however, part of an American tradition of letters in a direct line from Emerson to Walt Whitman

to John Steinbeck to Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan. His work is scripture of the living tradition for a large segment of contemporary America the way Mary Oliver's poetry is scripture for many Unitarian Universalists. America's Theologian Laureate is Bruce Springsteen.

Just as John Murray came to Gloucester by way of New Jersey, I bring you this morning a look at the American spiritual landscape by way of a New Jersey songwriter. In the tradition of our Unitarian Universalist belief of continuing revelation, we can see his work as a uniquely American voice in our living tradition. A voice that speaks of hope, overcoming life's obstacles in a hard land; a voice that articulates our liberal religious principles through songs that repeatedly deal with the dignity and worth of every person, and the search for truth and meaning, and justice in a post Vietnam, post Cold War America.

Springsteen shares much in common with the early Universalists in that as a live performer his reputation was made on his stage show, circuit-riding, one club and one hall at a time.

If you have a chance I encourage you to read his recent autobiography "Born to Run." In it in describing his desire to make it big in music to leave his mark he looked around and realized he was not the best guitar player he could hold his own, he was not the best singer, but what he could do is write and perform and if he was going to make it he had to be the best wirtier he could be the best storyteller and give each performance his all.

His music is more craftsman-like than sophisticated. He's a songwriter as much as a song writer. He's blue-collar, not white collar, union hall not nightclub. He is witty and a master showman. Bruce Springsteen's vision is, like the Universalism upon which this church was founded, a thoroughly American one.

David Reich writes in the July/August 1993 UU World that:

The early Universalists, both laity and clergy, had a distinctive character that set them off from other liberal religionists. Unlike the typically urban and urbane Unitarian clergy, many of the early Universalist preachers were rough-hewn circuit riders with little formal education...With their quick wits, their talent for improvisation, and their radically democratic bent, the circuit riders and their followers were quintessentially American, and their lives were the stuff of which good stories are made.

Springsteen is most effective when his songs tell stories. Religious stories, (especially those told by Jesus) most associated with the term parable are defined by certain traits. Parables are simple narratives easily recognized as set in every day life, in a certain time and place, with believable human characters who must deal with moral and ethical dilemmas. Often, we see the characters facing the consequences of a moral choice. Parables are not fairy tales. Parables are not analogies where each element within the story represents something in real life, but rather the parable makes its ethical point as whole. Springsteen's best story songs fit this exact mold. He is an American parablist.

He is quoted as saying

“The point in a lot my stuff is that they’re like scenarios, they’re like plays, ...Plus I write about moments...moments when people are pushed to take a certain action, to do something, to do anything to get out of their present situation or circumstances or predicament, to step out...(Marsh 62)”

The most famous of his songs, and the title of his autobiography “Born to Run” features a man and a woman struggling with their existence and feeling trapped the protagonist of this song cries -

Baby this town rips the bones from your back
It's a death trap, it's a suicide rap
We gotta get out while we're young
`Cause tramps like us, baby we were born to run

after describing all the different ways they are trapped the protagonist says

Together Wendy we can live with the sadness
I'll love you with all the madness in my soul
Someday girl I don't know when
We're gonna get to that place
Where we really wanna go
And we'll walk in the sun
But till then tramps like us
Baby we were born to run

Springsteen biographer Dave Marsh says,

“it would be a mistake to consider Springsteen the protagonist of the songs. The emotions are real, but the actions aren’t his. The characters are idealized and universalized, and their function is to symbolize and develop the themes of the songs. In a sense, Springsteen is all of the men and most of the women...but so is any listener” (Marsh 146).

It would be easy enough to think *Born to Run* is about Springsteen himself and it may well be. About his desire to escape the smallness of Asbury park and New Jersey about his desire to set this world on fire. But just as he was becoming an adult his father who struggled with mental illness up and moved himself and Springsteen’s mother to California – where for a few years they found their place in the sun.

Perhaps *Born to Run* is about Springsteen perhaps it is about his parents complicated relationship, perhaps it is about the human desire to start over to leave the wreckage of one’s past behind. Perhaps as a great parable it is all these things.

Although Springsteen favors rock and folk forms for his parables and many stories feature images of cars, leaving home, being on the run, and getting out of town, his music is not rebel music. Dave Marsh writes,

“In Springsteen’s songs, a questing, romantic spirit is inevitably scorned and banished; he is torn between his own abandonment of the traditional values and his desire to seek them as refuge” (Marsh 37).

This idea of seeking to break free from traditional values, yet at the same time wanting to seek refuge within their familiarity, their known forms, their comforting relationships, and their history resonates deeply with both religion and politics in America. I think this is one reason our Unitarian Universalist congregations are such an inviting place for so many who grew up in other faiths or no faith. Unitarian Universalist come-inners can relate to this feeling in their spiritual lives quite well- knowing the old forms and structures of religion or religions don’t work for them; that church or temple or synagogue was no longer in sync with their heart or their intellect – and yet – at the same desiring the connection to community, to family, to spirit, to heart and mind, to tradition that church and temple and synagogue provides.

The same holds true I believe with Americans in terms of their political aspirations. Many Americans are populists and progressives at heart. Even in this year of a horrible election process I do believe that people respond to political campaigns and to politicians articulating messages of hope, yet at the same time don’t want to feel abandoned in what they perceive and identify as traditional American values.

Springsteen’s America is easily recognizable, but not so easily pigeonholed. He sings about an America most of us have seen, if not experienced; felt if not been immersed in. Where else but in America can

you find Thunder Road and Greasy Lake, the Badlands and the Boardwalk, the swamps of Jersey, the Fire Roads and the Interstate, Mary's Place, 10th Avenue and 57th Street, and the Mansions of Glory? Where else but America live characters such as the Magic Rat and the Barefoot Girl, Hazy Davey, Spanish Johnny and Rosalita, and the Big Man who joined the Band?

Honesty, fairness, democracy, justice, compassion, and dignity are the principle values in this American landscape. The song parables are about people who have to struggle, often in vain, to achieve a life or make a living where their right to these things is respected.

The Vietnam Vet who is the main character in the story Born in the U.S.A. shouts his cry in the chorus of that song, "I was Born in the U.S.A!" not in Patriotic triumph, a grand old nephew of his Uncle Sam, but in despair that the country that sent him to war can not employ him, house him, feed him, or treat him with dignity upon his return.

Springsteen tells the real life parable of 23-year-old Guinean immigrant Amadou Diallo who was killed by plainclothes New York City policeman in 1999 in the song "41 shots." The narrator calls us to the chilling realization that:

It ain't no secret

No secret my friend

You can get killed just for living

In your American skin

Like most pragmatically useful religious voices, however, Springsteen deals in hope most of all. The narrator in “The Price you Pay,” after describing Moses entering the Promised Land, says:

But just across the county line,

a stranger passing through put up a sign

That counts the men fallen away to the price you pay,

and before the end of the day,

I’m gonna tear it down and throw it away

It’s imperative that sign come down. My opening words for the service this morning are taken from Springsteen’s song the Land of Hope and Dreams. That sign will stop us from getting to the Land of Hope and Dreams and that’s where we’re headed on a train out of this hard land.

Leave behind your sorrows

Let this day be the last

Tomorrow there'll be sunshine

And all this darkness past

Big wheels roll through fields

Where sunlight streams

Meet me in the land of hope and dreams

If you've ever had the fortune to attend a Springsteen tent meeting, ah Concert, you know that he ends the show proper, before any encores, by playing his most famous radio hit, "Born to Run", with all the house lights on. After a few hours with the lights off in the arena and only spotlights on the stage, it's quite an effect. There's a line in the song, "everybody's out on the run tonight, but there's no place left to hide" that sums up the song, the scene and the spiritual life.

It's a fitting final metaphor. Another rock poet, the Who's Pete Townsend has said,

“Rock and Roll will not let you run away from your problems, but it will let you dance all over them.”

Religion at its best is the same. You can not come to church seeking pure escapism, hoping to leave behind what’s hurting you, but it’s here, in church, if we as a community are doing our job, that you can find a place where you can face your troubles, ennoble yourself to live through what’s going on in the rest of your life – the spiritual equivalent of learning to dance. Church is where the heart goes dancing.

We are all, ultimately, left out in the open to the vicissitudes of life, the ups and downs, the joy and the pain. We seek light, enlightenment, and then when it shines on us like a midnight sun, it may seem overwhelming, like someone turning the lights on after we’ve been sitting in the dark for a while. But when all the lights go on, we realize we’re not alone, there are a whole lot of other people here with us, dancing in the dark. Doing the best we can. Dreaming American dreams, praying American prayers. Not of jingoism and chest thumping, but of making it, getting by, doing better, doing the right thing, dreams of dignity, worth, peace, things we learned about in a story once, things we heard in a parable somewhere, something playing on a car radio down by the boardwalk.

In a world without end may this be so.