

The Parablist
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In the summer of 1999 I went to hear a circuit-riding preacher for the first time. My brother had been hounding me to go such an event with him for years. I drove down from Massachusetts, picked up my brother in Manhattan and headed to the meeting across the river in New Jersey. We arrived at the parking lot to find a mega-church revival atmosphere with beach volleyball on trucked-in sand, cotton-candy vendors, Midway games, and 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 a person who comes from a long line of Azorean Catholics and is now a Unitarian Universalist minister 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 poet and 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 live show, circuit-riding, one club and one hall at a time. His music is more craftsman-like than sophisticated, 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. (<http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/2745.shtml>

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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.

“The point in a lot my stuff is that they're like scenarios, they're like plays, Bruce has said...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)”

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).

The story in the song “The Line” is a parable about the conflict between two virtues, justice and loyalty, or duty and love. The narrator of “The Line” is a recently discharged and widowed military vet named Carl who goes to work for the INS on the California Border Patrol.

There he meets a friend

Bobby Ramirez was a ten-year veteran
We became friends
his family was from Guanajuato
so the job it was different for him
He said' "They risk death in the deserts and mountains"

pay all they got to the smugglers rings,
 we send 'em home and they come right back again
 Carl, hunger is a powerful thing."

Bobby Ramirez and Carl dance and drink in Mexican bars with the same people they send back across the line. Carl meets a woman named Louisa and falls in love. Then one night on patrol he sees her...

she climbed into my truck
 she leaned towards me and we kissed
 as we drove her brother's shirt slipped open
 and I saw the tape across his chest

We were just about on the highway
 when Bobby's jeep come up in the dust on my right
 I pulled over and let my engine run
 and stepped out into his lights
 I felt myself movin'
 felt my gun restin' 'neath my hand
 we stood there starin' at each other
 as off through the arroyo she ran

Bobby Ramirez never says anything about the incident and Carl ends up quitting his job. The story's ending is similar to what is perhaps Springsteen's most fully realized parable. The conflict and tension is not over a lover, but the love the narrator has for his brother. The song is "Highway Patrolman." The narrator is Joe Roberts. He's a "a sergeant out of Perrineville, barracks number 8." Joe's got a brother named Franky and "Franky ain't no good." As Joe tells us:

Now ever since we was young kids
 it's been the same come down
 I get a call on the short wave
 Franky's in trouble downtown
 Well if it was any other man,
 I'd put him straight away
 But when it's your brother

sometimes you look the other way

The song's chorus relates images of Joe laughing and drinking with Franky, of dancing with his wife Maria while the band plays, noting that a man who turns his back on his family is "no good" and "no friend of mine." Eventually, Joe is forced to deal with Franky's erratic behavior professionally, as a call from a roadhouse identifies Franky as the person responsible for, "a kid lying on the floor looking bad, bleeding hard from his head." Joe speeds through the county in pursuit of his brother.

It was out at the crossroads, down round Willow bank
Seen a Buick with Ohio plates behind the wheel was Frank
Well I chased him through them county roads till a sign said
Canadian border five miles from here
I pulled over to the side of the highway and watched his taillights
disappear

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 Universalists come outers 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. 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, X-man and Cochise, 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. Hope as Andy Dufresne reminded Red at Shawshank Prison, is a good thing, perhaps the best of things. 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. 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, 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. This 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.