

THE MINISTER AS ARTIST: BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN AND MINISTRY
FORMATION

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It is a divine mystery, but it must be stated, that Christian ministry is God's work.¹ God is the one who accomplishes his purposes, and it is best for us human creatures to admit that we do not fully understand how it all works. No matter how well we perform, or how hard we try, it seems that there is very little we can do to bring about the transformation of those we are called to minister to. The work of transformation is profoundly the work of God. We scatter the seed, someone else may water it, but it is God who gives it any real growth (1 Cor 3:6). To not acknowledge this is foolish, because it is a fundamental reality when it comes to the work of Christian ministry. However, as part of the mystery of ministry, and just as surely as it is ultimately up to God, there is a human component to ministry as well. While not much will happen unless God shows up and does his work, it is also true that not much will happen unless the ministering person shows up and faithfully does their work. It seems like this is the way that God has made it.

This can be argued from at least two perspectives. First, Scripture provides us with a clear sense of the partnership that God intends to have with humanity in carrying out his work in this world. From the creation narrative itself with its injunction to the original couple to engage the world and take leadership over it (Gen 1:28), to the placing of Adam in the garden of Eden to work and tend it (Gen 2:15), to the call of Abraham to trust

1. This article is a version of an address given on the occasion of my installation as Garbutt F. Smith Chair of Ministry Formation at McMaster Divinity College, Hamilton, ON, Canada on 9 February 2015.

God and go on a journey so that God could make him a blessing to all nations (Gen 12:1–4), we can see that from the beginning God has always had a partnership with humanity in mind when it comes to carrying out his work in this world. Moving forward, this idea is mirrored in Jesus' commission to his disciples in Matt 28:18–20 when he commands them to go into the world and continue his mission. Again, the work of Jesus in this world is placed in the hands of human beings who are given the responsibility to carry it out. Secondly, human experience teaches us that this is true. While there are times when exceptions occur, by far the norm is that people come to Christ, grow in Christ, and the Kingdom of God is made manifest, when people are actively working for those ends. Few people come to Jesus apart from some kind of relational connection. Few of us grow in our faith without the help and input of others. Expressions of God's work, whether that be the preaching of the gospel, care for the marginalized, or any initiative that is in keeping with God's desire for justice to reign, never occur apart from some person or group's giving themselves to that work. While human effort alone may not bring about the transformation of the world that God desires, that transformation almost never happens apart from human effort.

Hence, there is a need for people to be formed for ministry. If people play a crucial role in God's work, then there is a need for them to be helped in their understanding and ability to participate as effectively as possible in this work. This is even more important when it comes to those who are called to lead in this enterprise. In fact, there is little need for churches to engage in training their laity, or for seminaries their students, if this is not the case. If the role of the human being is not essential to God's work, then there is no need for anyone to pursue training in ministry formation at all. However, if in God's economy human participation is crucial to the development of his kingdom on earth, then investing in their formation is fundamental to God's purposes. This being the case, some reflection on the role that the ministering person plays in achieving God's purposes is in order. This kind of reflection invites us to consider what role

ministry formation plays in helping the ministering person prepare for and continue in the work of Christian ministry.

Thinking about this tension between the divine and human work of ministry brings us to a place where it is best to acknowledge that ministry is an art, not a science. That is, there is not an $A + B = C$ formula to the work of ministry. Ministry does not fit a simple (or complex for that matter) formula that assures a particular result. Instead, it is more like an art. It may have some structure to it; there may be some ways of doing things that are better than others; perhaps there are some conventions that can be followed that will lead to “success,” but in the end, ministry is free-flowing, situational, and creative. Thus, when thinking about formation for ministry, perhaps much can be learned from studying artists. Those who work in the realm of the arts and live their lives creatively may provide a model for people who are seeking to develop themselves as effective ministers. Artists seek to engage other human beings by contributing something that offers meaning to their lives. Whether that be simply a piece of good entertainment or a profound reflection on the reality of living life in this world, the artist is one who is trying to say something that connects with other people and provides them with a meaningful experience and the opportunity to encounter a truth that helps them make sense of their lives.

One artist who is renowned for his ability to do this is the musician, Bruce Springsteen. Through his music, performances, and interaction with his fans, Springsteen rose to fame and has sustained his career in the fickle music industry due, in large part, to his ability to connect deeply with others and provide transcendent experiences for them. For millions of people, he is far more than a rock star; he is a person who helps them see themselves and their lives more clearly. For his audience, he captures the realities of life in this world in a way that clarifies the world and enables them to understand it more fully. For many, he acts as a kind of pastor who offers wisdom, comfort,

challenge, and direction for life.² Perhaps by looking at this one particular artist, there are things that we can learn about the art of ministry and what it means to be formed for ministry so that our lives may also be able to engage with the lives of others in ways that serve them just like the art of Springsteen serves so many.

This article will focus particularly on formation for vocational ministry, although the ideas expressed here can certainly apply to all people engaged in ministry whether it is their chosen career or not. The main contours of the article inform ministry in all its various shapes and speak to some key perspectives on what it means to be formed in a way that enables us to serve as God's partners in ministry most effectively.

Bruce Springsteen: The Artist

Springsteen was born into a working-class family in Freehold, New Jersey on September 23, 1949. He was formed by his parents' struggle to keep the family's head above water, his father's battle with finding steady work and depression, and his Catholic school education. Influenced by the music and image of Elvis, he found his salvation in the guitar and began playing in local bands when he was still a teenager.³

After years of struggle as a musician, Springsteen signed with Columbia records in 1972. The record company had the idea that he would be the "next Bob Dylan."⁴ His first album was released in 1973, and while it (his second record was also released that same year) received widespread critical praise, neither sold particularly well. This led to discussion at his record label that, if the next album did not sell well, it would be better for Columbia to cut their losses and release Springsteen from his contract. The release of his 1975 album, *Born to Run*, began to change Bruce's

2. One of Springsteen's biographers acknowledges that Bruce plays the role of "Pastor" to his audience sometimes. Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen*, 363.

3. For excellent biographies on Springsteen, see Marsh, *Bruce Springsteen*; Ames Carlin, *Bruce*; and Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen*.

4. This was the label that was thrust upon him by various promotional people and rock critics. See Ames Carlin, *Bruce*, 118–22.

life. The title track of the album became his first hit single, and the album exploded onto the music charts and into “classic” status as one of rock music’s most iconic records. Since then, he has become one of rock-and-roll’s all-time great artists, selling 120 million (and counting) albums, winning twenty Grammy awards, one Academy Award, and numerous other honors. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1999. He is known for his legendary live performances that often top the three-hour mark, and for his influence on many other musicians who have come after him. Perhaps one of the greatest testimonies to his brilliance is the longevity of his career and its sustained popularity. More than fifty years after he started performing with his first band, the Castiles, and after more than forty years of recording, Springsteen’s albums continue to go to the top of the charts, and he continues to play live shows to arenas and stadiums full of people. He is not a nostalgia act relegated to touring the casino circuit; he remains a relevant artist even as he finds himself in his mid-sixties.

But more than any of these achievements, what marks Springsteen’s legacy among pop or rock artists is the kind of impact that he has had on his audiences’ lives and Western (particularly American) culture as a whole. Testimony to this can be found in a multitude of books, articles, websites, and movies.⁵ Summarizing Springsteen’s unique effect Cadó and Abbruzzese write,

Springsteen’s authenticity as an artist has been consistently reinforced through his ability to suspend his superstar status in order to connect to the plight of ordinary working people. Whether it is through his simple story telling, his jeans, his energy driven live performances minus the theatrical thrills, Springsteen’s messages of hope—both lyrical and performative—carry that certain rock and roll promise of social change.⁶

This ability to connect with his audience and help bring their lives into a clearer focus unavoidably takes on religious

5. For an example of this kind of impact, see the documentary *Springsteen & I*, Black Dog Films, 2013.

6. Cadó and Abbruzzese, “Tracking Place and Identity,” 117.

connotations. The depth of connection brings a spiritual essence to many fans' experiences of Springsteen. Jeff Symynkywicz, in his book, *The Gospel According to Bruce Springsteen*, articulates what many have encountered through their exposure to Bruce's music: "his music helps us to make sense of the sometimes tangled, often disparate threads of our lives. This is, at its foundation, a religious undertaking, *a ministry of healing*."⁷

While it may be common for fans of various musical artists to feel passionate about their favorite band or singer, there is a widespread acknowledgment that Springsteen transcends the sometimes faux sincerity and seriousness that some artists try to generate with their music. Instead, Springsteen's ability "to make people feel transformed and connected" has allowed him to rise above (for the most part) the oft-mocked image of the earnest rock star.⁸

The deep connection that Springsteen has forged with his audience is more fully understood when one understands Springsteen's own vision of his music and role as an artist in society. His own understanding about his work and the potential contribution that it can make to the lives of others can inform our understanding of the work of ministry. The following quotations are just a sampling of the perspective that Springsteen has on what he is doing as a musician/artist.

The loss and search for faith and meaning have been at the core of my own work for most of my adult life.⁹

At this point I'm in the middle of a long conversation with my audience ... I can't do it by myself. I need my audience. It'll be a life-long journey by the time I'm done.¹⁰

7. Symynkywicz, *The Gospel*, xii (italics added).

8. Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, xii. A demonstration of this can be found in Springsteen's being asked to be the opening performer on "America: A Tribute to Heroes," a 9/11 benefit show that was aired simultaneously on all four major American television networks, September 21, 2001. Springsteen performed the song "My City of Ruins" to open the show and began it with the words, "this is a prayer for our fallen brothers and sisters." See Ames Carlin, *Bruce*, 408–9.

9. Burger, "Introduction," 246.

“The poets job is to know the soul.” You strive for that, assist your audience in finding and knowing theirs.¹¹

I just felt that what I was doing was rooted in a community—either real or imagined—and that my connection to that community was what made my writing and singing matter.¹²

Whatever grace God has decided to impart to us, it resides in our connection to one another, in honoring the life and the hopes and the dreams of the man or the woman up the street or across town. That’s where we make our small claim upon heaven.¹³

This vision of his work has been what has guided Springsteen as an artist and has bonded him with his audience. It is an understanding of the role that an artist can play in society and in people’s lives that should also drive Christian ministry, because it identifies places of commonality between the two. There are many specific ways that Springsteen’s work can inform the work of ministry and the way that people need to be formed for ministry. However, for our purposes here, let us consider three of the most significant ones.

1. *Exploring the Lived Reality*

Perhaps this is the heart of the artist’s work. All great artists do this in one way or another, they engage with the reality of what it means to be human and they invite, or even force us to go with them on an exploration of the inner and relational dimensions of our lives. The very best artists give us the sense that they themselves are deeply immersed in this journey, that they have been where we are, and that in some way makes us feel as though they are there with us now. This is one of the geniuses of Springsteen’s work, that is, he is deeply engaged in the question of what it means to be human and what it means to live in this

10. Sawyers, “Endlessly Seeking,” 31–32; Levy, “*Rolling Stone* Interview,” 50–56.

11. Percy, “Rock and Read,” 251.

12. Weider, “Bruce Springsteen,” 240.

13. Springsteen, “Barak Obama Campaign,” 333.

world. What further enjoins him to his audience is that he does this from a perspective of authenticity. Whether in his early work, where the perspective of the working class person dominates, or his later, when he explores the intricacies of relationships and commitment, or even much later, when he seeks to describe the experience of Americans devastated by tragedy and disillusionment, his music never moves too far away from the kind of life experiences that the majority of people go through. The words he chooses and situations he describes in his songs are ones that describe the lives of the “every” person. This flows out of his own formative years as the son of working class parents in the economically challenged town of Freehold, New Jersey. As a result, he is deeply rooted in a real world experience of life and its challenges, broken dreams, and possibilities for a better future. The only time he veers away from this may be when he engages in some self-mockery of his obviously less than “average” life as a rich, insulated rock musician.¹⁴

There are numerous ways that Springsteen’s music explores the human condition, but we will briefly explore three of them here.

The first is the human search for meaning. In “Racing in the Street,” a song from his fourth album, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*, Springsteen describes a man who is deeply engaged with cars and street racing. While the song has a somber tone to it, it also describes the pursuit of meaning that the protagonist is after through his commitment to street racing. The lyrics observe that some people “just give up living,” and this results in their ultimate slow death even if physical death remains a long way off. However, the protagonist in the song sees himself as a different sort of person. While some people just seem to “give up living and start dying little by little, piece by piece,” there are other people who come home from work and “wash up, and go racin’ in the street.” Springsteen’s character in this song is one

14. For example, in his song, “57 Channels,” he refers to his “bourgeois” house, and in his song, “Better days,” he sings about his image versus his reality by referring to himself as a “rich man in a poor man’s shirt.” See Dolan, *Bruce Springsteen*, 275–76.

who is determined to find meaning in this life. He refuses to give in to the deadness of a life that has no purpose. Purpose in life is essential, and he is determined to find something that brings joy, meaning, and hope to his life, because without it you are already dead even if you are still breathing.

The desire for meaning for the discovery of one's destiny, and the desire to know that which brings life to life, is a key theme in Springsteen. In fact, it is this search for meaning and the refusal to give up on life that is characteristic of most of the characters in Springsteen's songs. Through their determination to find purpose in their existence, no matter how difficult their circumstances may be, Springsteen's audience is also challenged to look for meaning and pursue it in their own lives.

A second theme that appears in Springsteen's exploration of the lived reality of human life is the celebration of life that comes from finding joy in the experiences that this world affords us. This joy and the meaning that it provides often comes in the small occurrences of daily life. Throughout his catalogue, Springsteen affirms that life is good and that there is joy in small moments and in the everyday realities of work, relationships, and the random experiences that make up our lives.

In the song "Girls in their Summer Clothes" from his album *Magic*, Springsteen reflects on the beauty found in the otherwise mundane experience of taking an evening walk through town. Lovers holding hands, bicycle spokes spinning, breezes crossing front porches, and kids' rubber balls bouncing are all a part of the experience as the lead character walks along "blessing avenue." Then, while enjoying the common loveliness of his hometown as the day draws to an end, the song's narrator observes the beauty of young women dressed in their summer clothes walking past. Even though they just pass him by, not even noticing the narrator, one cannot help but realize that he is captured by the wonder of all that there is to see on an evening stroll through Anywhere, USA. While the narrator in the song feels like an outsider to these experiences, he longs for connection with them. All of these small experiences, the lovers, the rubber balls, the beauty of the young women, inject meaning into life. As an artist, Springsteen captures this reality, and as

listeners to the song, we resonate with it and are reminded that our life has beauty and meaning if we are willing to look for it.

In an earlier song, "Badlands," also from the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* album, Springsteen makes plain that no matter how hard one's circumstances may be there is the possibility for joy in life. He categorically states, "it ain't no sin to be glad that you're alive." Springsteen's music invites listeners to find the joy of being alive and embrace it as part of what brings meaning to our existence in this world. This is part of the artist's calling to help people consider the possibilities inherent in our lived experience and help us pay attention to them.

A third theme that Springsteen has consistently explored is the struggle with commitment and how the embrace of it can open us up to the possibilities that life has to offer. Anyone who is familiar with Springsteen's own personal life, at least as is portrayed by his biographers, knows that the struggle with commitment was a particularly personal one for Bruce in his earlier years. He writes about this in his 1992 song, "Leap of Faith." The song, from the album *Lucky Town*, explicitly reflects on how he had grown tired of "heartbreak and despair," but when his significant other asked for a commitment, his heart faltered. He was unable to make the "jump." However, she instructs him that it "takes a leap of faith" (or a commitment) to make a meaningful relationship work. It takes "guts" and trust in one's own heart in order to make something valuable. In the latter part of the song, he clearly rejoices in the fullness of meaning and joy that his ultimate commitment to his lover has brought to his life.

Here, as an artist, Springsteen reflects on the challenges that are inherent in relationships between human beings and that are part of the lived reality of human experience. However, these challenges also invite us to transcend the fear and potential pitfalls of relational commitment and enter into that commitment, because it has the potential to bring happiness and fulfillment through a meaningful love. This is a concrete exploration of human relationships and love. It is the work of an artist to hold up the mirror to the realities of the human experience, and not only invite exploration, but also offer wisdom for the possibilities that lie before us.

The key to Springsteen in this area of exploring the human landscape is that his theology is an embodied theology.¹⁵ Just as God enters into the reality of life in this world through the incarnation of Jesus as a human being, as a musician/artist who can teach us about ministry, Bruce follows an incarnational pattern, entering into the human condition. Whether it is the exploration of love, marriage, aging, finding joy, or searching for meaning, Springsteen descends into the deep realities of life in this world and ascends with insight to nourish the journey.¹⁶ As the artist engages in this kind of immersion in exploring and in trying to say something about the condition of being human, so too must the ministering person do the same. This is fundamental to the work of effective ministry. To be formed for ministry is to be oriented toward and committed to engaging in the journey of exploring and understanding the human condition—not just a cursory understanding of people’s circumstances, but a commitment to go deep, to explore all that is true, to be a fellow journeyer and guide, and to live with attentiveness to and curiosity about the lives and experiences of those around you. It is the desire to know people and to be able to express truths about life in this world that brings the lives of those we minister to into sharper focus and that brings us closer to one another in a way that creates genuine, grace-filled community. This is where ministry connects with people at a deep level and offers them the kind of mirror for reflection that leads to the possibility of understanding one’s need for God, grace, repentance, and transformation.

To be formed for ministry is to commit ourselves to the exploration of the soul, the psyche, and the lived experience of the people we serve. We, like the artist represented by Bruce Springsteen, are fellow sojourners who are committed to giving

15. While I do not mean to insinuate that Springsteen is trying to be theologically oriented on purpose (although in fact he may be), what I am saying is that he does have a theological orientation, and it is helpful for us to notice it here.

16. Paul Contino uses the analogy of the artist’s work being oriented towards the descent and ascent in his lecture, “The Theology of Bruce Springsteen.”

language and voice to the realities of the human journey, providing a lens, or perhaps even lenses, so that through our ministry people will see the world more clearly, and thus see themselves more completely.

2. *Providing Hope in the Midst of Our Lived Reality*

In his recent book, *Springsteen Album by Album*, Ryan White captures the essence of Springsteen's sense of his work, when he quotes Bruce's thoughts about being an artist: "Fundamentally we're repairmen. Everybody's broken somewhere. You can't get through life without it. The job we ask of our artists is to rummage through the parts and see if they can make something useful for us all."¹⁷

This sense of calling that Springsteen carries into his work, to explore life and see if he can help us make something useful out of what he finds, reveals that he desires to be helpful to his audience. This is why, with some exceptions, hope is never far away in a Springsteen song. While many of his songs explore the dark side of life, there is most often a determination to survive, to make a better life, or to find a thread of hope that one can hang onto despite the difficult circumstances that life may bring. Throughout the Springsteen catalogue, hope may come in many forms, whether it is the protagonist in the song, "Atlantic City," who has "debts that no honest man could pay," but finds some hope when he meets a guy whom he agrees to "do a little favor for." Most probably this is an illegal activity, but still, it is the source of hope in desperate times. Or for the young man in the song, "Thunder Road" (one of Springsteen's most iconic songs), hope comes from trying to convince his girl, "Mary," that their best hope lies in getting out of the dead-end town that they live in and in hitting the open road that will lead them "anywhere." Hope is a prevailing theme in the Springsteen songbook. While the human experience in this world can be bleak and filled with trials, the characters in his songs are most often people who refuse to give up hope.

17. White, *Springsteen Album by Album*, 267.

In the song, “Promised Land,” from the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* album, the narrator sees a storm brewing out in the desert; nonetheless, he packs his bags and heads “straight into the storm.” This storm is going to blow away everything that “ain’t got the faith to stand its ground.” However, the narrator declares his faith, when he states that he “ain’t a boy”; he is a man who believes “in a promised land.” The song as a whole, consciously or unconsciously, reflects the biblical story of the Exodus with its allusions to hard labor and freedom through a desert escape.¹⁸ At its core is a belief in the idea that there is a land of promise that people can enter into, if they have the faith to stand their ground and believe in the possibility of a better life. This is hope exemplified.

In the aforementioned song, “Badlands,” Springsteen paints a picture of hard work in the fields and the reality of the human craving for power and control over the lives of others. The song acknowledges that the way things are is not always easy and that the way the world works is not always fair. However, the singer declares his belief in the love that has been given him, in the faith that can save him, and in the hope that someday may raise him “above these badlands.” The song is a classic example of the realistic vision that Springsteen offers audiences in his music. Life for the average working person may include hard toil; it may lead to a feeling of powerlessness, but if one is willing to imagine and embrace it, hope still remains in the love of others, the belief in oneself, and the possibility of salvation in its many forms.

Hope in Springsteen’s songs is available to everyone and can even have eschatological implications (e.g. in the song, “Land of Hope and Dreams,” a long-time concert closer that appears in a studio version—the 2012 *Wrecking Ball* album). The song paints a picture of a train that is rolling through sunlit fields and where “a good companion” is accompanying the person who is the subject of the song. There is an invitation to leave sorrows behind and “let this day be your last.” There are promises that there will be sunshine tomorrow and that all the darkness will be

18. Hazan Arnoff, “Covenant Reversed,” 180.

past in the “land of hope and dreams.” This hope is unrestricted; the train is made for all of humanity, saints, sinners, losers, winners, whores, gamblers, and lost souls. This is a train that offers acceptance and hope regardless of one’s background or station in life. It offers an all-encompassing hope that points to life in a new world, where none of the old categories matter anymore.

This is the recurring theme in Springsteen’s music. Springsteen is rooted in the realities of this life, but he is armed with the possibilities that hope brings and the way that it can transcend the challenges that this world can bring. This is the essence of Christian ministry.

Hope is at the core of Christian ministry. To be formed for ministry is to be a dealer in hope. It is to be able to rummage around in the brokenness of this world, and somehow be able to offer a word or an action that lifts people up out of the mire of brokenness and into a vision for a renewed humanity.

What the artist offers, and the minister must follow suit in offering, is a proclamation of hope against whatever darkness we might face in this world. It is a proclamation of the love that is given, faith that brings salvation, and hope that can raise our gaze to the promised land and out of the badlands of whatever circumstances we face that the Christian minister must learn to offer. Of course, for the Christian minister, this hope is always rooted in 1 Pet 1:3. “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (NIV). To be formed for ministry is to know the power of this message in our own lives and, as we understand the human condition and the need for hope, to be compelled to share it as the fundamental theme of our work.

3. Facilitating Space for Transcendence Encounter

As ministering people, we cannot force God to respond to us, nor can we do things that guarantee that his presence will show up in a powerful way whenever we need it to. However, what we can do as ministers is try and create spaces where people can meet with God and possibly encounter his presence.

As an artist, Bruce Springsteen has made his reputation not only as a songwriter but also as a unique live performer. As one writer has noted, Springsteen has built and maintained his appeal through “spectacularly intense, lengthy, eclectic, and heartfelt concerts driven by humor, passion, physical movement, and ambition.”¹⁹ Robert Duncan, writing for *Cream Magazine*, recounted his experience of covering Bruce and the E-Street Band live this way:

I was on the road three days and nights with Bruce Springsteen and the E-Street Band, and that’s about as good a time stand in which to hold a resurrection as I can think of ... [Some] speak glowingly of Bruce in terms of “charisma.” But charisma has the odor of the secular. After what I saw, heard and felt, I’m looking for a word that’s something more in the religious price range.²⁰

As an artist, Springsteen sees his concerts as more than rock n’ roll shows; for him, they offer the possibility of transformation, and they have the feeling of a revival meeting.²¹

One of the things Springsteen will often do at many of his concerts is yell to the crowd the question, “Is anybody alive out there?” When Bruce calls out this question to his audience, he is not simply trying to rally the crowd, but rather, he is asking the question that is central to his work: are you alive or are you just living? Have you found meaning and purpose? Have you found a reason to believe? Perhaps even, have you found God? Springsteen’s concert question is the same as the call and response technique that we find in African-American preaching. It is a question that asks for a deep response. It is imbued with meaning. It is an existential question. It is *the* question that Springsteen is concerned with helping his audience answer. Are you really living your life?

Like any good preacher, Springsteen is attempting to bring his congregation into an encounter with the deeper truths. It is a call to self-examination and consideration of the meaning of life.

19. Hazan Arnoff, “Covenant Reversed,” 187.

20. Duncan, “Lawdamercy,” 87.

21. Turner, “Bruce Bonus,” 343.

The live experience of a Springsteen show runs the gamut of emotion: joy, sorrow, contemplation, and elation. In that context comes the possibility of transcendence. As David Masciotra has observed, in a Springsteen performance,

Spirituality is emphasized not only through the musical strength and audience participation in these songs but also their lyrical content, which centers on faith—faith in God and certainly faith in humanity as a shared experience that allows people to courageously face losses of dignity, abortions of justice and conditions of horror.²²

At a Springsteen show several years ago during the bridge in his 2002 song, “The Rising,” a post-9/11 song that reflects on the losses of that day and the possibility that hope can rise up out of them, I found myself deeply encountering what I understand to be the Spirit of God. I was moved by the words and the performance of the song to the point that I raised my hand up in the air just like I do in church sometimes. This is not unusual to see at a Springsteen show: lots of hands go in the air for, I am sure, various reasons. However, for me, this was a moment of transcendence. The feeling I had was the very same one I have in church sometimes. A mystical experience of what I know to be God’s presence, yet here I was at a rock-and-roll concert experiencing what for me was normally relegated to the realm of the religious. My theology of God is able to accommodate such experiences, but this particular one was profound enough that it left a strong impression on me, and I was reminded of the power of the artist to create spaces for this kind of transcendent encounter.

This is what we do as ministering people: we try and create spaces for transcendence and potential transformation. To be formed for ministry is to understand that it is God’s work to reveal himself and to bring transformation, but it is also at the same time to understand that we have a role to play. We are invited to create opportunities for the possibility of divine transcendence. We are invited to believe that when we bring ourselves to the preparation and execution of a worship service

22. Masciotra, *Working on a Dream*, 212.

or a sermon, when we enter the hospital room, the nursing home, the counseling appointment, or the classroom, we are there as one who has the potential to create a space for transcendence—to create a space for the possibility for those we are serving to encounter God in a fresh way. Inevitably, there will be times that we fail, and God will work anyway. But that is not what he calls us to, or what we should count on, and it is certainly not the goal of ministry formation. To be formed for ministry is to be aware that we are called by God to be his partner in ministry. That is the way it works; it is our story as God’s people. He works through us; it always has been that way, and there is no reason to believe that it will not continue to be that way. A great artist like Springsteen understands the power that he has to create space for transcendent moments, to lead people toward transformation. Perhaps he is not so aware (although I think that he is) of the fact that this gift is given by God, and that God is glad to use it. As people being formed for ministry, we are people who need to understand the opportunity that we have to create the spaces where people will encounter God, and while we need to steward that with great humility and much trepidation, we also need to steward it with real awareness of its potential and of the great gift that it is to be called to serve people in this way.

Conclusion

On Springsteen’s 2012 album, *Wrecking Ball*, which is a pastoral response to the financial crises of 2008–2009, the corruption that was uncovered by it, and the devastation that it brought to so many people, there is a song called “Rocky Ground.” It is a gospel-flavored song that speaks directly to the plight of many people who lost so much in that bleak period. In the song, he sings to the “shepherds” whose flock has roamed far from the hill. We have all been traveling over “rocky ground,” and so he admonishes the shepherds to find their flock and “get them to higher ground,” and to tend their flock, or else they are bound to stray. He reminds those shepherds that they will be called to account for their service on the day of judgment, where the blood on their hands will come back on them twice. While the

shepherds Springsteen has in mind could include a number of possibilities, certainly one of them can be those called into the vocation of Christian ministry. The song has significant ramifications for those who have been called to give leadership to God's flock, made up of people who are tempted and prone to wander. This world is often rocky ground, and it is the shepherd's duty to try and get the flock onto higher ground. That is, to help them get an honest perspective on their lives and see their ultimate hope in Christ. This is the work of Christian ministry. It is God's work, and we are his partners in it.

To follow the example of the artist is to give ourselves fully to others, in all of our failings, foibles, and neuroses, and to be a shepherd to the flock, a flock that needs to come to make sense of their lives, understand the hope that Christ provides, and experience the God of love who created them and who longs for them to know him. To be formed for ministry is to enter into their lives and offer ourselves as artist and minister, as a fellow traveler making our way through this world to the better land that God will provide. It is to say,

Come on up for the rising
 Come on up lay your hands in mine
 Come on up for the rising
 Come on up for the rising tonight.²³

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