Deliver Me to Somewhere

By Rev. Arlin Roy (11/9/25)

This is going to be a comparatively old-fashioned sermon. In the era when I was training to be a minister, parish clergy would sometimes do what was essentially a book review by describing the central thesis of a book, supporting arguments, and their conclusions. I haven't done that for fifty years, until now.

I have prepared for this carefully. I read the overly long book, Deliver Me from Nowhere, by Warren Zanes, about the making of Bruce Springsteen's album, "Nebraska." I watched the movie, "Deliver Me from Nowhere." I have also listened to Springsteen's album, "Nebraska." I read Bruce Springsteen's memoir, Born to Run, and unless you are interested in the backroom negotiations about the money aspect of rock and roll, skim most of it until you get to where he describes his personal experiences. Reportedly, Springsteen has seen the movie nearly a dozen times and gave his blessing to every bit of it while it was being made. Oh, and I lived in Nebraska for the first seventeen years of my life.

But this sermon is not about the physical state of Nebraska any more than it is about Springsteen's hometown, Freehold, New Jersey. This sermon is about a period in his life when he ended a long, grueling tour and his very troubled, sensitive, and fragmented psyche descended into depression. This sermon is about

the album “Nebraska” as the externalization of inner emptiness, both Bruce’s emotional “floor” with a gaping hole in it and the emptiness revealed in Bruce’s emotional life when he no longer has (what he describes) as the “medication of rock ‘n’ roll” to keep him busy. This reminds me of when, years ago, I referred someone to a movie about Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys he said that he didn’t like their music so he wouldn’t go. That film was about Wilson’s highly problematic relationship with his over-controlling father. “Deliver Me from Nowhere” is a cry of desperation and healing every man and anyone who cares for a man needs to see. Over half of the Mens+ Group saw it in the first week it was out.

With affectionate respect, I will refer to Springsteen from here on as Bruce, because he has been more open and transparent about his struggle to be a loving person than is typical of a celebrity. He describes himself as a willful child who had the run of his grandparents’ house, so that he ate when and how he wished, he ran free, he stayed up until three AM and awoke at three PM, until it was time to go to school and it all came crashing down. He didn’t really live with his parents until it was time to go to school, and then his mother moved the nuclear family a little away from the grandparents. Bruce wrote (and I quote):

When I became of school age and had to conform to a time schedule, it sent me into an inner rage that lasted most of my school years. My mother knew we were all way overdue for a reckoning and, to her credit, tried to reclaim me. . . .No hot

water, four tiny rooms, four blocks away from my grandparents. There she tried to set some normal boundaries. It was too late. Those four blocks might as well have been a million miles. I was roaring with anger and loss and every chance I got; I returned to stay with my grandparents. It was my true home, and they felt like my real parents. I could and would not leave. (Bruce Springsteen, Born to Run, page 11)

Here's the gist of the story. Bruce had become a rock icon when he ended a long tour by retreating to an isolated house on a lake in New Jersey. He goes into a depression and—although he has formed a "casual" relationship with a lovely young woman—he cannot reliably engage with her on a consistent, emotionally intimate basis. He watched the worst kind of TV—very dark horror movies. He obsessed on the traumas of his youth with his alcoholic, physically and emotionally abusive, sadistic father in a lonely, poverty-stricken household. So, he wrote depressing songs of hopeless yearning for affluence and comfort, working class helplessness, and sad yearning for a loving father. Bruce wrote the songs and sang them into a home recording machine. He released the album as a raw demo, unsupported by a band or fancy technical tricks, without a tour or marketing campaign. Bruce took a friend with him on a coast-to-coast road trip.

And then Bruce realized a truth, at a little town in Texas, and I quote:

In the blue light of dusk, there is a river. By the river, there is a fair. At the fair, there is music, a small stage, filled by a local band playing for their neighbors on a balmy night. I watch men and women lazily dancing in each other's arms, and I scan the crowd for the pretty local girls. I'm anonymous and then . . .I'm gone. From nowhere, a despair overcomes me; I feel an envy of these men and women

and their late-summer ritual, the small pleasures that bind them and this town together. . . .all I can think of is that I want to be amongst them, of them, and I know I can't. I can only watch. . . .It's here, in this little river town, that my life as an observer, an actor staying cautiously and safely out of the emotional fray, away from the consequences, the normal messiness of living and loving, reveals its cost to me. (Bruce Springsteen, Born to Run, page 305)

But at least he had an epiphany, a vision to move him toward something better, and I quote Warren Zanes's book.

That experience of "a local scene that seems to him bucolic and out of his reach . . .an idealized picture of community, connection, small-town peace [was] the antithesis of "Nebraska's hopelessness." (Warren Zanes, Deliver Me from Nowhere, pg. 264)

Any of us could go into a deep depression. We are all burdened--some more than others--by painful memories, lost loves, fearful failings, and frustrated yearnings. Some of us, right here, have been traumatized and memories of extremely painful events or chronic conditions are not just recalled, they are re-lived in excruciating immediacy. Pain is a universal human experience from birth onward. Some of us have had more than was tolerable given how impressionable or vulnerable we were at the time. And then we may realize what has been missing from our lives, and it is sometimes a threatening understanding, something that upends our usual functioning.

Bruce had friends, good friends, who helped him, and he had a manager, Jon Landau, who tried to sensitively listen to him at every turn, at any time of day or night, and finally got him to the therapy he needed. Trauma is deeply

destructive, but not the sum of any one person's psyche. The capacity to touch and be touched emotionally also lies within most people, the touch of hands in concern and friendship. Just as there were people worried about Bruce so there are people available to us, here, to be helpful and present for us in our pain. You are not Nowhere, you are here. That is why I entitled this sermon as "Deliver Me to Somewhere." And although any one person and any one congregation cannot repair all trauma and all despair, we can listen empathetically and get you whatever help Trump has not ripped away from America yet. We have chosen to stand for Love here, to stand for the potential in human beings to learn to love and be loved. Standing for love in this way is not political in terms of electoral campaigns, but political in the sense that "polis" is Greek for "the people." We are standing for the rights of people to freely express who they are and freely be themselves.

And there are people trying to help. Last week, Allison Aubry on WNYC reported on a researcher who discovered that both meditation and viewing inspiring videos first thing in the morning for five days helped instill hope in people for 10 days and speculated that if this were repeated every day it would have a long-lasting effect. Another researcher discovered that people in a bad mood tend to view sad and horror films. She recommended "counter programming a positive feed," i.e., more optimistic, happier dramas for viewing. (Allison Aubry, "Got 3 Minutes? This habit may help boost hope and reduce stress," Morning

Edition,10-27-2025) Bruce had compulsively watched “downer movies” of murder, horror, and angry despair. We can all take a more assertive stand about what comes into our heads and bodies, and focus—despite the algorithms that feed us disturbing stuff. We can take charge of our moods a little better.

Oh, and I have reserved a crucial turn in the narrative until now, and this is a Spoiler Alert. Bruce got himself into therapy and that turned some things around. Few of us will go on to record blockbuster songs, as he did, but many of us have been helped by changing who we talk to and who we listen to. We may develop devoted friends wherever we can find them. In an echo of some classic myths, Bruce as a small child went after his abusive father with a baseball bat. As a young adult, he faced his demons and hashed out with them who was the stronger, them or him. But that is hardly the sum of it, and a good therapist tells you behavioral change needs to follow insight. For example, we need to adapt to a changing world and change our behavior as needed. We may need to practice meditation and prayer daily to keep before us that vision of love that fuels inner peace and considerate relationships. We need to show up for social gatherings, clubs, service organizations, volunteer opportunities, and religious congregations--consistently--to participate in a healing life. Yes, you may be anxious about a social gathering or going to a religious service, but challenging anxiety at least limits its hold on you. Would you expect anything else from me, a minister and psychotherapist? I know

the combination of careful introspection, behavioral change, and positive social interactions works.

And yet it doesn't always work. Nothing is perfect in this life. There will be health issues that are not going to work out, there will be a decline into old age and death. At least you are not alone. You are not without others who empathize and attend to your fears and concerns. Good companions show up more often in social gatherings and service clubs and religious congregations than in mere chance encounters or dating web sites.

Given the inevitability of nothing working perfectly, or forever, why do we bother? Because we have now. We can pay attention to the life we are living and work with it. This is how meditation is useful, because it directs us to how we feel—now—where we are—now—and then we decide what we can do to make it work out better. It isn't transactional or manipulative, it is all about being attentive to what you can change for the better and when. Bruce got stuck in emotional mud because he couldn't see beyond it and he told us about it so we can empathetically see beyond our stuck places. That is the function of art. He didn't have to write a memoir and participate in a film of that very dismal period in his life. But he did it out of the fullness of his generosity. And we can likewise be generous with our attentiveness to each other—right here—out of the fulness we experience.