

‘The Rising’ of Bruce Springsteen

— BY PATRICK KELLY —

*I believe in the love that you gave me,
I believe in the faith that can save me,
I believe in the hope and I pray that one day
It may raise me above these Badlands.*
—Bruce Springsteen, “Badlands”

FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE have always played a part in Bruce Springsteen’s songs, but this has become more explicit in recent years. Springsteen’s willingness to talk about these themes also is relatively new.

The Rev. Andrew Greeley’s article, “The Catholic Imagination of Bruce Springsteen” (*Am.*, 2/6/88), seems to have been a catalyst in this regard. The Catholic novelist Walker Percy read the article and wrote to Springsteen in early 1989, particularly interested in the fact that Greeley described him as a Catholic.

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“If this is true, and I am too,” his letter read, “it would appear the two of us are rarities in our professions: you as a post-modern musician, I as a writer, a novelist and a philosopher. That and your admiration of Flannery O’Connor. She was a dear friend of mine, though she was a much more heroic Catholic than I.” Walker Percy died before Springsteen responded to his letter, but the musician wrote in a four-page letter to Percy’s widow:

The loss and search for faith and meaning have been at the core of my own work for most of my adult life. I’d like to think that perhaps that is what Dr. Percy heard and was what moved him to write me. Those issues are still what motivate me to sit down, pick up my guitar and write.

Percy’s nephew, Will Percy, subsequently interviewed Springsteen about the formative influences on his song-writing for the Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles’s magazine *Doubletake* in 1998. (Excerpts from the above letters are reprinted from that article.) In this conversation, which took place at Springsteen’s farm in New Jersey, Springsteen talked about the influence Flannery O’Connor’s novels had on his song-writing in his late 20’s. Recalling writing the songs for the “Nebraska” CD, he said:

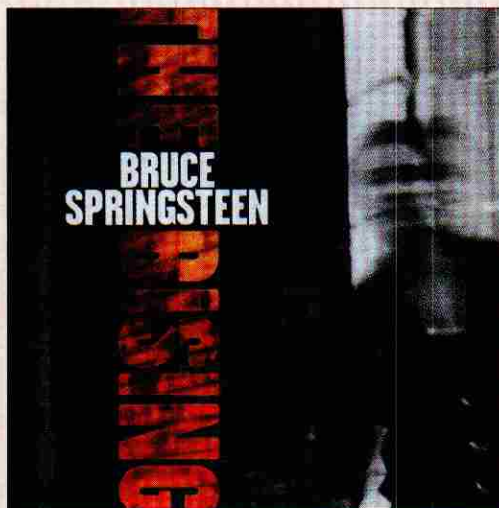
There was something in those stories of hers that I felt captured a certain part of the American character that I was interested in writing about. They were a big, big revelation. She got to the heart of some part of meanness that she never spelled out, because if she spelled it out you wouldn’t be getting it. It was always at the core of every one of her stories—the way that she’d left that hole there, that hole that’s inside of everybody. There was some dark thing—a component of spirituality—that I sensed in her stories, and that set me off exploring characters of my own. She knew original sin—knew how to give it the flesh of a story.

Springsteen’s interest in questions of meaning is a very personal matter. In a recent interview with Matt Lauer of NBC’s “Today,” he talked about his family and the symbols of faith from his youth, and how these became more important to him as he grew older:

I grew up with a very big extended family, with a lot of aunts. We had about five or six houses on one street. The church was in the middle and the convent was here (on one side of the church) and the rectory was here (on the other side) and we surrounded those things. So, I’ve seen more weddings

and funerals.... But there were always the aunts and uncles around me. And, I think in some fashion the older I got the more those things mattered. And, even before I was married, when my life had begun to become something very different, those were the times when I felt I needed to connect most and probably for my own purposes, really.

Connecting was helpful to him and had a big impact on the parish community he grew up in, St. Rose of Lima in Freehold, N.J. After he had moved back to New Jersey from Los Angeles, one of his aunts told him about the new Hispanic parishioners at St. Rose who were struggling to make it in Freehold. Wanting to help in some way, he did a show in his old grade school gymnasium to help the parish buy the local Y.M.C.A. building. It is now used, among other things, as a community center for the Spanish-speaking parishioners. Profits from the show also contributed toward the salary of a Spanish-speaking priest for the parish.



Springsteen continues to pursue issues of faith and meaning through his songs; and he does this with, at times, considerable artistry and depth in the newly released CD “The Rising” (Columbia, 2002). This CD has the most explicitly religious imagery of any of his work to date: “precious blood,” “holy cross,” “the cross of my calling,” “pearl and silver” (i.e., the rosary), “Mary in the garden,” “holy pictures,” along with references to God and the devil, and the interreligious “seven pictures of Buddha,” “the prophet’s on my tongue” and “seven days, seven candles.”

Not all the songs are about Sept. 11, 2001, but especially poignant are lyrics that recall the sky on that morning, as in the song “Empty Sky” and the title song, “The Rising.” In the latter, the narrator sees the image of “Mary in the garden/ In the garden of a thousand sighs/ There’s holy pictures of our children, dancin’ in a sky filled with light.” A “dream of life” comes to the narrator as he contemplates the sky:

*Sky of blackness and sorrow
 (a dream of life)
 Sky of love, sky of tears
 (a dream of life)
 Sky of glory and sadness
 (a dream of life)
 Sky of mercy, sky of fear
 (a dream of life)
 Sky of memory and shadow
 (a dream of life)
 Your burnin' wind
 fills my arms tonight
 Sky of longing and emptiness
 (a dream of life)
 Sky of fullness, sky of
 blessed life*

The refrain, "Come on up for the rising," suggests, as does much else in the song, new life and resurrection. When asked in a recent interview by Ted Koppel of "Nightline" if it was the resurrection he had in mind, Springsteen responded, "Yeah, well, I'm a good.... Well, I was a good Catholic boy when I was little, so those images for me are always very close, and they explain a lot about life." He then elaborated: "What I was trying to describe, one of the most powerful images of the 11th, that I'd read in the paper, some of the people coming down were talking about the emergency workers who were ascending. And you know, that was just an image I felt left with, after that particular day. The idea of those guys going up the stairs, up the stairs, ascending, ascending. I mean you could be ascending a smoky staircase, you could be in the afterlife, moving on."


He sings of an emergency worker in the song "Into the Fire," with the recurring line "love and duty called you someplace higher, somewhere up the stairs...." It is one song that turns prayerful and evokes images of a litany of the saints as he sings about the ones who have gone "someplace higher."

"My City of Ruins" contains recurring images of new

life and resurrection, with the oft-repeated refrain, "Come on, rise up...." With what sounds like a gospel choir supporting him in the background, Springsteen ends the song in the mode of a prayer:

*With these hands,
 With these hands, With these hands,
 With these hands, I pray Lord
 With these hands, With these hands,
 I pray for the strength, Lord
 With these hands, With these hands,
 I pray for the faith, Lord
 With these hands, With these hands,
 I pray for your love, Lord.*

Springsteen's piety is not the simple-minded, flag-waving type. He introduced the song "Born in the USA" at his summer concert in Detroit by talking about the need for vigilance at this time because there has been a "rollback" in the area of civil rights since Sept. 11. None of the songs on "The Rising" naively celebrates America's virtues. One, which highlights the deep and tragic divisions in the world today, "Worlds Apart," includes vocals by the Pakistani singers Asif Ali Khan and Group. Images of tenderness that two lovers experience, who at the same time "stand worlds apart," shift to the larger world stage and a plea that those of us who are living might be able to make some connection with one another, so that the painful memories around loss of life do not serve to increase hatred and violence. In his words, "May the living let us in, before the dead tear us apart." Rather than let the blood that has been shed in the past do this, he holds out hope for reconciliation: "We'll let blood build a bridge/ over mountains draped in stars/ I'll meet you on the ridge/ between these worlds apart."

Springsteen's music has always wrestled with questions of meaning and the difficulty of maintaining faith and hope in trying circumstances. As Matt Lauer said in his recent interview with Springsteen, this is just a particularly good time for Springsteen's kind of music. Springsteen said he went to the beach in Asbury Park soon after Sept. 11, and a passenger in the next car recognized him, rolled down the window and yelled, "We need you now." A genuine calling from the people. I'm glad Springsteen responded. 

Acknowledgments

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"You will be my witnesses to the ends of the earth" (Acts of the Apostles 1:8)

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