

## Some interesting thoughts of Bruce Springsteen on writing, art, spirituality and ethics

Taken from:

Rock and Read: Will Percy interviews Bruce Springsteen (*DoubleTake Magazine*, Spring 1998)

### An introduction sketching out the context of this interview:

In early 1989, Walker Percy penned a fan letter "of sorts" to Bruce Springsteen, praising the musician's "spiritual journey" and hoping to begin a correspondence between them. At the time, Springsteen hesitated in responding, but he later picked up a copy of *The Moviegoer* and began a new journey into Dr. Percy's writing. Walker Percy died in May 1990, and the two never met, but Percy's novels and essays, among other books and films, have had a most profound impact on Springsteen's songwriting.

In 1995, Springsteen recorded *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, a richly lyrical album that forged a new purpose for his music, linking him in some ways to the tradition of such artist-activists as John Steinbeck (Joad is the radical hero of *The Grapes of Wrath*) and folk music icon Woody Guthrie. Springsteen's songs tell us, in their familiar narrative style, about ordinary people struggling through life's twists and turns, presenting a cast of characters that includes immigrant families, border patrolmen, mid-western steelworkers, and America's poor and disenfranchised. The populist sensibility of Guthrie can be heard throughout: it is music competing for the public conscience.

Following an Atlanta concert promoting the album, Will Percy, Walker's nephew, met Springsteen backstage, and the two talked for hours. When Springsteen mentioned his regret at never having written back to Will's uncle, Will encouraged him to write to his aunt, Walker's widow. A few months later, Springsteen, who likes to say that "it's hard for me to write unless there's music underneath," sat down and wrote four pages – a letter years in the making.

Last fall, Will Percy and Springsteen had the chance to meet again, this time on the Springsteen farm in central New Jersey, not far from the small town where Springsteen grew up or from the Jersey Shore clubs where he first made his mark in the 1970s. With a tape running, the two explored the importance of books in Springsteen's life, most recently his discovery of Dr. Percy's essays in *The Message in the Bottle*. Like the long-in-coming letter to Mrs. Percy, perhaps this is part of the conversation that Bruce Springsteen might have had with Walker Percy.

### **The quotes:**

#### **On the influence of American novelists, especially of roman catholic Flannery O'Connor:**

*The really important reading that I did began in my late twenties, with authors like Flannery O'Connor. 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. She had talent and she had ideas, and the one served the other.*

*I think I'd come out of a period of my own writing where I'd been writing big, sometimes operatic, and occasionally rhetorical things. I was interested in finding another way to write about those subjects, about people, another way to address what was going on around me and in the country – a more scaled-down, more personal, more restrained way of getting some of my ideas across. So right prior to the record Nebraska [1982], I was deep into O'Connor. And then, later on, that led me to your uncle's books, and Bobbie Ann Mason's novels – I like her work.*

#### **On the focus on 'scapegoat mechanisms' – 'the politics of exclusion':**

*I think that's been a theme that's run through much of my writing: the politics of exclusion. My characters aren't really antiheroes. Maybe that makes them old-fashioned in some way. They're interested in being included, and they're trying to figure out what's in their way.*

#### **On reflective sharing of what he experienced as eye-openers himself (especially concerning violent tendencies in man – the dynamics of 'original sin'):**

*I was always trying to shoot for the moon. I had some lofty ideas about using my own music, to give people something to think about – to think about the world, and what's right and wrong. I'd been affected that way by records, and I wanted my own music and writing to extend themselves in that way.*

*In most of the recent songs, I tell violent stories very quietly. You're hearing characters' thoughts – what they're thinking after all the events that have shaped their situation have transpired. So I try to get that internal sound, like that feeling at night when you're in bed and staring at the ceiling, reflective in some fashion. I wanted the songs to have the kind of intimacy that took you inside yourself and then back out into the world.*

*I'll use music as a way of defining and coloring the characters, conveying the characters' rhythm of speech and pace. The music acts as a very still surface, and the lyrics create a violent emotional life over it, or under it, and I let those elements bang up against each other.*

**On the tension between the personal ('immanent') and the universal ('transcendental')  
– writing as a quest to perceive 'the soul' in all things:**

*I don't think you sit down and write anything that isn't personal in some way. In the end, all your work is a result of your own psychology and experience. I never really write with a particular ideology in mind. As a writer, you're searching for ways to present different moral questions – to yourself because you're not sure how you will respond, and to your audience. That's what you get paid for – from what I can tell. Part of what we call entertainment should be "food for thought." That's what I was interested in doing since I was very young, how we live in the world and how we ought to live in the world. I think politics are implicit. I'm not interested in writing rhetoric or ideology. I think it was Walt Whitman who said, "The poet's job is to know the soul." You strive for that, assist your audience in finding and knowing theirs. That's always at the core of what you're writing, of what drives your music.*

**On 'community', 'interconnectedness' and the 'language of the soul' in the modern world:**

*... how do you create the kind of home you want to live in, how do you create the kind of society you want to live in, what part do you play in doing that? To me, those things are all connected, but those connections are hard to make. The pace of the modern world, industrialization, postindustrialization, have all made human connection very difficult to maintain and sustain. To bring that modern situation alive – how we live now, our hang-ups and choices – that's what music and film and art are about – that's the service you're providing, that's the function you're providing as an artist. That's what keeps me interested in writing.*

*What we call "art" has to do with social policy – and it has to do with how you and your wife or you and your lover are getting along on any given day. I was interested in my music covering all those bases. And how do I do that? I do that by telling stories, through characters' voices – hopefully stories about inclusion. The stories in *The Ghost of Tom Joad* were an extension of those ideas: stories about brothers, lovers, movement, exclusion – political exclusion, social exclusion – and also the responsibility of these individuals – making bad choices, or choices they've been backed up against the wall to make.*

*The way all those things intersect is what interests me. The way the social issues and the personal issues cross over one another. To me, that's how people live. These things cross over our lives daily. People get tangled up in them, don't know how to address them, get lost in them. My work is a map, for whatever it's worth – for both my audience and for myself – and it's the only thing of value along with, hopefully, a well-lived life that we leave to the people we care about. I was lucky that I stumbled onto this opportunity early in my life. I think that the only thing that was uncommon was that I found a language that I was able to express those ideas with. Other people all the time struggle to find the language, or don't find the language – the language of the soul – or explode into violence or indifference or numbness, just numbed out in front of TV. "The Language" – that's what William Carlos Williams kept saying, the language of live people, not dead people!*

*If I'm overgeneralizing, just stop me. I'm not sure if I am or not, but in some fashion that's my intent, to establish a commonality by revealing our inner common humanity, by telling good stories about a lot of different kinds of people. The songs on the last album connected me up with my past, with what I'd written about in my past, and they also connected me up with what I felt was the future of my writing.*

## On the possibilities and pitfalls of the mimetically driven pop culture and celebrity cults:

*I've made records that I knew would find a smaller audience than others that I've made. I suppose the larger question is, How do you get that type of work to be heard – despite the noise of modern society and the media, two hundred television channels? Today, people are swamped with a lot of junk, so the outlets and the avenues for any halfway introspective work tend to be marginalized. The last record might have been heard occasionally on the radio, but not very much. It's a paradox for an artist – if you go into your work with the idea of having some effect upon society, when, by the choice of the particular media, it's marginalized from the beginning. I don't know of any answer, except the hope that somehow you do get heard – and there are some publishing houses and television channels and music channels that are interested in presenting that kind of work.*

*With the exception of certain moments in the history of popular culture, it's difficult to tell what has an impact anymore, and particularly now when there's so many alternatives. Now, we have the fifth Batman movie! I think about the part in the essay "The Man on the Train" where your uncle talks about alienation. He says the truly alienated man isn't the guy who's despairing and trying to find his place in the world. It's the guy who just finished his twentieth Erle Stanley Gardner Perry Mason novel. That is the lonely man! That is the alienated man! So you could say, similarly, the guy who just saw the fifth Batman picture, he's the alienated man. But as much as anyone, I still like to go out on a Saturday night and buy the popcorn and watch things explode, but when that becomes such a major part of the choices that you have, when you have sixteen cinemas and fourteen of them are playing almost exactly the same picture, you feel that something's going wrong here. And if you live outside a major metropolitan area, maybe you're lucky if there's a theater in town that's playing films that fall slightly outside of those choices.*

*There's an illusion of choice that's out there, but it's an illusion, it's not real choice. I think that's true in the political arena and in pop culture, and I guess there's a certain condescension and cynicism that goes along with it – the assumption that people aren't ready for something new and different.*

*I don't think the fascination with celebrities will ever really go away. An intellectual would say that people in the Industrial Age left their farms and their towns, so they couldn't gossip with their neighbors over the fence anymore – and all of a sudden there was a rise of a celebrity culture so we could have some people in common that we could talk about.*

*The substantive moral concern might be that we live in a country where the only story might be who's succeeding and who's number one, and what are you doing with it. It sure does become a problem if a certain part of your life as a writer – your "celebrity," or whatever you want to call it – can blur and obscure the story that you're interested in telling. I've felt that and seen that at certain times. One of the most common questions I was asked on the last tour, even by very intelligent reviewers was, "Why are you writing these songs? What are you complaining about? You've done great." That's where your uncle's essay "Notes on a Novel about the End of the World" was very helpful to me and my writing. Your uncle addresses the story behind those same comments: "The material is so depressing. The songs are so down." He explains the moral and human purpose of writing by using that analogy of the canary that goes down into the mine with the miners: when the canary*

*starts squawking and squawking and finally keels over, the miners figure it's time to come up and think things over a little bit. That's the writer-the twentieth-century writer is the canary for the larger society.*

*Maybe a lot of us use the idea of "celebrity" to maintain the notion that everything is all right, that there's always someone making their million the next day. As a celebrity, you don't worry about your bills, you have an enormous freedom to write and to do what you want. You can live with it well. But if your work is involved in trying to show where the country is hurting and where people are hurting, your own success is used to knock down or undercut the questions you ask of your audience. It's tricky, because American society has a very strict idea of what success is and what failure is. We're all "born in the U.S.A." and some part of you carries that with you. But it's ironic if "celebrity" is used to reassure lots of people, barely making it, that "Look, someone's really making it, making it big, so everything is all right, just lose yourself and all your troubles in that big-time success!"*

### **[Elvis Presley as an example for the potentials of 'celebrity':]**

*You don't have to be doing work that's directly socially conscious. You could make an argument that one of the most socially conscious artists in the second half of this century was Elvis Presley, even if he probably didn't start out with any set of political ideas that he wanted to accomplish. He said, "I'm all shook up and I want to shake you up," and that's what happened. He had an enormous impact on the way that people lived, how they responded to themselves, to their own physicality, to the integration of their own nature. I think that he was one of the people, in his own way, who led to the sixties and the Civil Rights movement. He began getting us "all shook up," this poor white kid from Mississippi who connected with black folks through their music, which he made his own and then gave to others. So pop culture is a funny thing – you can affect people in a lot of different ways.*

### **On the social impact and 'ecclesial' nature of early rock 'n' roll:**

*We were trying to excite people, we were trying to make people feel alive. The core of rock music was cathartic. There was some fundamental catharsis that occurred in "Louie, Louie." That lives on, that pursuit. Its very nature was to get people "in touch" with themselves and with each other in some fashion. So initially you were just trying to excite people, and make them happy, alert them to themselves, and do the same for yourself. It's a way of combating your own indifference, your own tendency to slip into alienation and isolation. That's also in "Man on the Train": we can't be alienated together. If we're all alienated together, we're really not alienated.*

*That's a lot of what music did for me – it provided me with a community, filled with people, and brothers and sisters who I didn't know, but who I knew were out there. We had this enormous thing in common, this "thing" that initially felt like a secret. Music always provided that home for me, a home where my spirit could wander. It performed the function that all art and film and good human relations performed – it provided me with the kind of "home" always described by those philosophers your uncle loved.*

*There are very real communities that were built up around that notion – the very real community of your local club on Saturday night. The importance of bar bands all across America is that they nourish and inspire that community. So there are the very real communities of people and characters, whether it's in Asbury Park or a*

*million different towns across the land. And then there is the community that it was enabling you to imagine, but that you haven't seen yet. You don't even know it exists, but you feel that, because of what you heard or experienced, it could exist.*

We might call this an 'eschatological' imagination: the imagination of a community 'beyond' and 'foundational to' this ever unfinished and unaccomplished world...

Thanks Bruce, for these words of wisdom.