

Podcast #44- A Psychologist Analyzes Bruce Springsteen

I want to offer up some thoughts about the psychology of Bruce Springsteen today. Now, Springsteen's psyche isn't the easiest thing for me to analyze, I must admit. The reason is that he is also my musical hero. I've been a fan since 1969 when he ruled the musical scene on the Jersey Shore where I grew up. In fact, he lived in my neighborhood and played at my high school prom.

So, I love his music and, well, frankly, I idealize him as a performer and songwriter. Just as shrinks aren't supposed to treat anyone in their own family, so too it feels awkward wearing my therapist hat trying to understand Springsteen's psyche. It's hard to be objective. Fortunately, I'm greatly aided by his highly revealing and soul-searching autobiography, *Born to Run*, and, secondarily by his intimate storytelling in his one-man Broadway show, *Springsteen on Broadway*.

Springsteen's ruthless honesty and clear-eyed introspection no doubt derive, in part, from the fact that he has been in psychotherapy for over 30 years, much of it with

psychiatrist, Wayne Myers—therapeutic work that he says lay at the heart of the autobiography. For someone so prominent to talk about his mental illness—in Springsteen’s case it was a profound and long standing depression--has made it safe for others to do the same.

Springsteen’s depression found its roots in a childhood filled with neglect, emotional cruelty, and unstable attachments. His father, Doug, was an explosive alcoholic tormented by persecutory and paranoid thoughts. Bruce says of his father, “He loved me but he couldn’t stand me.” His mother is rather idealized in his autobiography, although he can’t help but begrudge her inability to leave his father, instead covering for him, sacrificing her own interests and, in many ways, the interests of her children in the process. Springsteen says this about his parents, “ My mom and pops were bound by an unknowable thread. They’d made their deal a long time ago; she had her man who wouldn’t leave and he had his gal who couldn’t leave. Those were the rules and they superseded all others, even motherhood.”

Springsteen describes a childhood terrain that was psychologically empty and dangerous, devoid as it was of

protection. Yet it also fostered his determination to make something of himself, to fashion a world and a life that he could control and that would be his ticket out of his childhood world. There is often a longing in his music for his hometown, but the nostalgia and melancholy is as much for a home that he wishes was there as the world that was actually there, because the one that was actually there was parochial and repressive. Fortunately for us, Springsteen's solution was to become a musician.

Much of *Born to Run* is the story of Springsteen's evolution as a musician, first as a guitarist and then as a singer/songwriter, and fans of his music will love watching this amazing journey from the inside out. Readers get more than a glimpse behind the curtain as he traces his career from musical roots laid down on the Jersey Shore, to the breakthrough success of his *Born to Run* album, through his efforts to engage his audience in political activism, to attaining superstar status through the nuclear popularity of his *Born in the USA* album and stadium tour, all the way up to his embrace of family life today.

There is a charming modesty and self-awareness in Springsteen's view of his own talent. He freely admits there were other guitarists better than he, and certainly others with a better voice, so he realized early on that the road to success would have to lie in his songwriting, his amazing ability to tell stories and perform them in ways that took his audience into his embrace and spoke to their collective pains and triumphs.

The story of Springsteen's ambition, his dedication to hard work, his determination to learn and his self-confidence and a sizeable ego is surprising at first given that he was incubated in such a disturbed family environment. The answer has to lie, it seems to me, first in Springsteen's innate musicality and poetic soul, and second, in his determination to fight back against his father's degradations and find a voice and career that loudly announced his presence to a mother preoccupied with her own worries and marital stresses and strains.

Springsteen pursued his ambition with a laser-like focus. Sure, serendipity played a role, as it must in any artist's fame—being in the right place, meeting the right

people, making the right choices at the right time—but in Springsteen’s account, he self-consciously made decisions at crucial junctures that would pay off in spades down the road. He auditioned for John Hammond by himself and not with his band, fought his manager for control over his songs and rejected his friend, Steve Van Zandt’s wish for more creative control. He showed a laser-like focus, in other words, on his own goals.

Averse to mood-altering substances, Springsteen deliberately avoided alcohol (for the most part), drugs and the excesses so often associated with the lifestyles—and downfalls—of rock stars. He was steeped in the counterculture and politics of the '60s; another long-hair “freak,” but one who stayed true to the blue-collar world of his childhood. (He says at some point, “I never saw a man leave a house in a jacket and tie unless it was Sunday or he was in trouble.”) He was a rebel who cherished freedom yet he was critical of the hedonistic and narcissistic personal license that characterized many of his generation. “Personal license,” Springsteen argues, “was to freedom what

masturbation was to sex. It's not bad, but it's not the real thing.”

The coming-of-age themes of independence, romance and freedom—adorned as they usually are by images of cars and girls—which marked Springsteen's early work never went away. But they were gradually subsumed by his desire to write about class and the pain and injustice an unfair system visited upon the lives of those at the bottom of the economic ladder. In these efforts, I think, Bruce was trying to redeem his family, to heal what one author once called the “Hidden Injuries of Class.” Although anticipated by earlier work, his album *Darkness on the Edge of Town* was his first, and among his most successful, attempts to find political meaning in the lives of the working-class people with whom Springsteen had grown up—especially, of course, his father. It was emblematic of the creative ways he sought to show listeners that if you open up individual lives, you find the world, and that social conflict is most poignantly seen in the private lives of individuals. Springsteen describes the songs on *Darkness* as “the purest distillation of what I wanted my rock ‘n’ roll music to be about.”

Darkness describes the pain of a son witnessing his father's decline, yet one that mirrored the social decline all around him. The album is spare, melancholy, at times angry, yet filled with beauty and the promise of escape. Beginning with this album, Springsteen begins a 40-year journey attempting to integrate the personal and the political, a journey highlighted by such lyrical masterpieces as (to name just a few) "Factory", "The River," "Nebraska," "Born in the USA," "The Ghost of Tom Joad," "Youngstown," "Galveston Bay," "The Rising," "My City of Ruins," "American Skin," "Last to Die," "Wrecking Ball," "We Take Care of Our Own," and "High Hopes." Springsteen's carefully crafted characters embody the conflicts and suffering of the wider society, but tell their stories in highly personal ways. Always, there are notes of redemption, transcendence and hope. (He once said, "I want them to feel older, weathered, wiser but not beaten.")

Springsteen fans, of course, don't merely love his characters and music, but view his three- to four-hour live shows as near-religious experiences. To the millions who have seen him, Springsteen leaves nothing on the stage, leaving his audience spent, satisfied, and aglow with the fire

of the connection made. In *Born to Run*, Springsteen talks repeatedly about the exhilarating power—on both sides of the stage apron—of his live performances. He writes, “It’s a life-giving, joyful, sweat-drenched, muscle-aching, voice-blowing, mind-clearing, exhausting, soul-energizing, cathartic pleasure and privilege every night. You can sing about your misery, the world’s misery, your most devastating experiences, but there is something in the gathering of souls that blows the blues away.” And having seen Springsteen perform live dozens of times, I can testify to the success of his intention. Night after night, he creates what I would call an “ecstatic community,” however briefly, and believes that this is one of his main ways of helping us feel connected to something bigger than our lonely isolated selves.

Touring was also Springsteen’s way of avoiding depression, as well as the possibility of romantic intimacy which he both longed for and feared. In his private life he was lonely, insecure and disconnected. As is true with most people wrestling with depression, he struggled with a belief that he didn’t really deserve love and that, if he found it, he

would be burdened with responsibility. Being on the road provided him with the illusion of intimacy without risk.

Springsteen is hard on himself here and doesn't let his fans down easy either, when he says, "During the show, as good as it is, as real as the emotions called upon are, as physically moving and as hopefully inspirational as I work to make it, it's fiction, theater, a creation; it isn't reality....And at the end of the day, life trumps art....always." I would put it this way: Performing, for Springsteen, allowed him to express his genuine feelings of exultation, but it was also a cover, providing a transient detachment and an opportunity for an almost daily reinvention of himself.

In the end, psychotherapy and antidepressant medication weren't enough to fix what ailed Bruce Springsteen. Like with so many people, it was love that did that, the insistent and forgiving love of Patti Scialfa, his wife of almost 25 years, and their three children, Evan, Jessica and Sam. It went something like this: Springsteen was compelled to endure the healing yet painful vulnerability of love, the presence of which, he admits, "shames your lack of faith while raining light upon the good you've created."

Born to Run is Springsteen's attempt to tell the story of his art, but it is a story steeped in a complex narrative about his real life. It is an extraordinarily honest and sensitive story about someone who has left his mark in music, politics and the lives of so many of his fans. In the story of his life, Springsteen underlines the healing power of love, the need for a secure home, and the value of facing one's demons in order to enjoy true freedom. He helps us see that our political acts have private consequences, and our most personal acts have a political dimension. He is the heir to Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger as a songwriter who brings us to account for what we are doing—or not doing—to stand up for those who are less fortunate than us, and against those who are taking us into what often looks like a new Gilded Age.

Springsteen succeeds in his intention. In his own words: "I fought my whole life, studied, played, worked, because I wanted to hear and know the whole story, and understand as much of it as I could. I wanted to understand in order to free myself of its most damaging influences, its malevolent forces, to celebrate and honor its beauty, its

power, and to be able to tell it well to my friends, my family and to you.”

Readers of *Born to Run* will see that he tells it extremely well.