

Opinion | OP-ED COLUMNIST

The Other Education

David Brooks NOV. 26, 2009

Like many of you, I went to elementary school, high school and college. I took such and such classes, earned such and such grades, and amassed such and such degrees.

But on the night of Feb. 2, 1975, I turned on WMMR in Philadelphia and became mesmerized by a concert the radio station was broadcasting. The concert was by a group I'd never heard of — Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. Thus began a part of my second education.

We don't usually think of this second education. For reasons having to do with the peculiarities of our civilization, we pay a great deal of attention to our scholastic educations, which are formal and supervised, and we devote much less public thought to our emotional educations, which are unsupervised and haphazard. This is odd, since our emotional educations are much more important to our long-term happiness and the quality of our lives.

In any case, over the next few decades Springsteen would become one of the professors in my second education. In album after album he assigned a new course in my emotional curriculum.

This second education doesn't work the way the scholastic education works. In a normal schoolroom, information walks through the front door and announces itself by light of day. It's direct. The teacher describes the material to be covered, and then everybody works through it.

The knowledge transmitted in an emotional education, on the other hand, comes indirectly, seeping through the cracks of the windowpanes, from under the floorboards and through the vents. It's generally a byproduct of the search for pleasure, and the learning is indirect and unconscious.

From that first night in the winter of 1975, I wanted the thrill that Springsteen was offering. His manager, Jon Landau, says that each style of music elicits its own set of responses. Rock, when done right, is jolting and exhilarating.

Once I got a taste of that emotional uplift, I was hooked. The uplifting experiences alone were bound to open the mind for learning.

I followed Springsteen into his world. Once again, it wasn't the explicit characters that mattered most. Springsteen sings about teenage couples out on a desperate lark, workers struggling as the mills close down, and drifters on the wrong side of the law. These stories don't directly touch my life, and as far as I know he's never written a song about a middle-age pundit who interviews politicians by day and makes mind-numbingly repetitive school lunches at night.

What mattered most, as with any artist, were the assumptions behind the stories. His tales take place in a distinct universe, a distinct map of reality. In Springsteen's universe, life's "losers" always retain their dignity. Their choices have immense moral consequences, and are seen on an epic and anthemic scale.

There are certain prominent neighborhoods on his map — one called defeat, another called exaltation, another called nostalgia. Certain emotional chords — stoicism, for one — are common, while others are absent. “There is no sarcasm in his writing,” Landau says, “and not a lot of irony.”

I find I can’t really describe what this landscape feels like, especially in newspaper prose. But I do believe his narrative tone, the mental map, has worked its way into my head, influencing the way I organize the buzzing confusion of reality, shaping the unconscious categories through which I perceive events. Just as being from New York or rural Georgia gives you a perspective from which to see the world, so spending time in Springsteen’s universe inculcates its own preconscious viewpoint.

Then there is the man himself. Like other parts of the emotional education, it is hard to bring the knowledge to consciousness, but I do think important lessons are communicated by that embarrassed half-giggle he falls into when talking about himself. I do think a message is conveyed in the way he continually situates himself within a tradition — de-emphasizing his own individual contributions, stressing instead the R&B groups, the gospel and folk singers whose work comes out through him.

I’m not claiming my second education has been exemplary or advanced. I’m describing it because I have only become aware of it retrospectively, and society pays too much attention to the first education and not enough to the second.

In fact, we all gather our own emotional faculty — artists, friends, family and teams. Each refines and develops the inner instrument with a million strings.

Last week, my kids attended their first Springsteen concert in Baltimore. At one point, I looked over at my 15-year-old daughter. She had her hands clapped to her cheeks and a look of slack-jawed, joyous astonishment on her face. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing — 10,000 people in a state of utter abandon, with Springsteen surrendering himself to them in the center of the arena.

It begins again.

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