

Running Head: HEALING A NATION

Healing a nation: Deconstructing Bruce Springsteen's *The Rising*

Paper previously presented at

Glory Days: A Bruce Springsteen Symposium

Monmouth, NJ

September 9-11, 2005

Brad Yates, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Mass Communications

University of West Georgia

Department of Mass Communications

1601 Maple Street

Carrollton, GA 30118-4400

Phone: 678-839-4938

Fax: 678-839-4926

E-mail: byates@westga.edu

Abstract

The United States was traumatized by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The nation was forever changed and had to somehow recover from the worst attack ever on U.S. soil. The healing came in many forms including renditions of “God Bless America” at the World Series and candlelight vigils for those lost in the World Trade Center collapse. Healing also came in the form of Bruce Springsteen’s album *The Rising*. Springsteen reported a fan saw him one day after the attacks and said, “We need you now” (Volpe, 2002, para. 2). The result of this plea was an album that celebrated the heroes whose lives were lost and that offered hope for the future through faith in God and each other. Using principles of media literacy as a framework, this paper will deconstruct *The Rising*, discuss how Springsteen’s music helped heal the wounds inflicted by the terrorists, and explore the impact of the media’s coverage of Springsteen’s album on the nation’s healing.

Healing a nation: Deconstructing Bruce Springsteen's *The Rising*

The United States was traumatized by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The nation was forever changed and had to somehow recover from the worst attack ever on U.S. soil. The healing came in many forms including renditions of “God Bless America” at the World Series and candlelight vigils for those lost in the World Trade Center collapse. Healing also came in the form of Bruce Springsteen’s album *The Rising*. Springsteen reported a fan saw him one day after the attacks and said, “We need you now” (Volpe, 2002, para. 2). The result of this plea was an album that celebrated the heroes whose lives were lost and that offered hope for the future through faith in God each other. Using principles of media literacy as a framework, this paper will deconstruct *The Rising*, discuss how Springsteen’s music helped heal the wounds inflicted by the terrorists, and explore the impact of the media’s coverage of Springsteen’s album on the nation’s healing.

MEDIA LITERACY AND DECONSTRUCTION AS FRAMEWORK

Media literacy defined

In order to formally analyze *The Rising*, a framework of analysis is necessary; therefore, this discussion will be guided by the principles of media literacy. According to the Aspen Institute’s Report of the National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, a media literate person—and everyone should have the opportunity to become one—can decode, evaluate, analyze and produce both print and electronic media. The fundamental objective of media literacy is critical autonomy in relationship to

all media. Emphases in media literacy training range widely, including informed citizenship, aesthetic appreciation and expression, social advocacy, self-esteem, and consumer competence (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 1).

Deconstruction defined

The concepts of decoding, evaluation, and analysis are incorporated into a basic media literacy skill known as “deconstruction.” The New Mexico Media Literacy Project¹ (NMMLP) has defined deconstruction as “the careful and close analysis of a piece of media, looking beneath the surface (the characters, plot, language, etc.) to understand its deeper meanings” (New Mexico Media Literacy Project, 2005b, para. 1). One of the basic elements of media literacy is that each person constructs his/her meaning from media messages; therefore, there is no specific formula for deconstructing a media example. However, NMMLP offers several questions that help guide the deconstruction process. These questions include:

Who paid for the media? Why?

Who is being targeted?

What text, images or sounds lead you to this conclusion?

What is the text (literal meaning) of the message?

¹ The NMMLP is an outreach project that fosters critical thinking and activism in society to create media literate consumers and build healthy communities (New Mexico Media Literacy Project, 2005a). Veteran newsman Hugh Downs and his daughter, Diedre, founded NMMLP in 1993. NMMLP is sponsored by Albuquerque Academy and supported by the McCune Foundation, the New Mexico Department of Education, the New Mexico Department of Health, other public and private sources and earned income sources (Heins & Cho, 2003; New Mexico Media Literacy Project, 2005a).

What is the subtext (unstated or underlying message)?

What kind of lifestyle is presented? Is it glamorized? How?

What values are expressed?

What tools or techniques of persuasion are used?

What story is not being told?

In what ways is this a healthy and/or unhealthy media message? (NMMLP, 2005b, para. 3).

Several of these questions will guide the deconstruction of Springsteen's Grammy award-winning album and provide context for understanding how his work helped offer healing to a terrorized nation.

DECONSTRUCTION AT WORK

The Rising: An overall review

The process of deconstruction is at work in many of the rock critics' reviews of Springsteen's album. One critic wrote, "*The Rising*...is Bruce Springsteen's way of using rock music for healing and remembering" (Bird, 2002, para. 2). A closer examination of each track on the album offers insight into the text and subtext of the messages Springsteen conveys. One could argue that three themes run throughout the entire album: 1) the terror attacks of 9/11; 2) the aftermath; and 3) hope for the future. Several of the tracks incorporate all three themes, which speaks to Springsteen's talent as a storyteller and his ability to infuse hope in spite of perilous times.

The usual rock critics weighed in on the merit of Springsteen's first full studio album with the E Street Band since 1984's *Born in the U.S.A.*, and the overwhelming

majority had high praise for the Jersey Shore icon and his pals. Kurt Loder of *Rolling Stone* mused that the prospect of pop stars weighing in on the terrorist attacks to somehow translate the horror of that fateful day into something beyond “dismal trivialization” was a scary thought (Loder, 2002, p. 81). However, Springsteen was able to capture the horror of the event and give hope for the future.

With his new album, *The Rising*, Springsteen wades into the wreckage and pain of that horrendous event and emerges bearing fifteen songs that genuflect with enormous grace before the sorrows that drift in its wake. The small miracle of his accomplishment is that at no point does he give vent to the anger felt by so many Americans: the hunger for revenge. The music is often fierce in its execution, but in essence it is a requiem for those who perished in that sudden inferno, and those who died trying to save them. Springsteen grandly salutes their innocence and their courage, and holds out a hand to those who mourn them, who seek the comfort of an explanation for the inexplicable (Loder, 2002, p. 81).

The tracks

The following paragraphs attempt to answer two questions that are part of the deconstruction process: 1) What is the text (literal meaning) of the message? and 2) What is the subtext (unstated or underlying message)?

“Lonesome Day” (track 1) opens *The Rising* in a moody yet uplifting way. Stout (2002) describes the cut as “a tremendous track that talks of the need for fortitude and resiliency when dealing with heartache. Its burning guitars and gospel-like backing vocals help make it one of the album’s most stirring numbers” (para. 3). The lyrics are an

artful example of how the three themes noted above are all weaved into one track.

Springsteen conjures up images of the destruction of 9/11, speaks to the lonely days afterwards, and renews faith and hope because the “lonesome day” will soon pass.

Hell's brewin' dark sun's on the rise/This storm'll blow through by and by/House
is on fire, Viper's in the grass/A little revenge and this too shall pass/This too shall
pass, I'm gonna pray/Right now all I got's this lonesome day (Springsteen, 2002g).

“Into the Fire,” which is track two on the album, directly addresses the attack on the Twin Towers and acknowledges the courage of the rescue workers who sacrificed themselves to save others (Loder, 2002). Springsteen had planned to sing this song on the *America: A Tribute to Heroes* telethon, but at the last minute decided it was not quite ready for a live performance. Instead, he elected to sing “My City of Ruins,” the final cut on this album, which he had written a few years earlier but was fitting for the occasion (Cherry, 2002).

“Into the Fire” starts out with the simplicity of a white-gospel hymn (“I need your kiss/But love and duty called you someplace higher”), then blossoms into a luminous anthem: “May your strength give us strength/May your faith give us faith/May your hope give us hope/May your love bring us love” (Loder, 2002, p. 82).

“It is the 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’” (Kelly, 2003, para. 14).

“Waitin’ on a Sunny Day” (track 3) is an upbeat sing-a-long cut that is a “carefree celebration of the things that deliver us from sadness and pain” (French, 2002, para. 14).

It's rainin' but there ain't a cloud in the sky/Musta been a tear from your
 eye/Everything'll be okay/Funny thought I felt a sweet summer breeze/Musta
 been you sighin' so deep/Don't worry we're gonna find a way/I'm waitin', waitin'
 on a sunny day/Gonna chase the clouds away/Waitin' on a sunny day
 (Springsteen, 2002m).

Lyricaly this may not be Springsteen's most innovative, but the cut offers up the hope for the future that underlies almost every track on the album. The "faux-Mellencamp instrumentation and poppy feel is a welcome relief from the album's more heavy side and reminds us of music's ability to lift one's spirits (French, 2002, para. 14).

On "Nothing Man," track four of the album, Springsteen paints a picture of an unassuming small-town man who has trouble dealing with the notoriety of his heroic acts after September 11th. "The character, however—forever changed by what he's experienced—is uninterested in such back patting and feels frustrated at the quick return to normalcy within his community" (Stout, 2002, para. 4).

Track five, "Countin' On a Miracle," introduces a husband who has hopes of reuniting with his deceased wife (Segal, 2002). On this track Springsteen juxtaposes an upbeat, hard-rocking musical arrangement with tragic lyrics. Yet, the underlying theme that comes through is one of optimism. The husband says the fairytale is over, but he will keep on living for his wife in spite of her departure from this world.

I'm runnin' through the forest/With this wolf at my heels/My king is lost at
 midnight/When the tower bells peal/We've got no fairytale ending/In God's hands
 our fate is complete/Your heaven's here in my heart/Our love's this dust beneath

my feet/Just this dust beneath my feet/If I'm gonna live /I'll life my life/Darlin' to you (Springsteen, 2002a).

The title of track six, “Empty Sky,” is a literal reflection of what Springsteen saw from near his home in Rumson, New Jersey. Springsteen told ABC’s Ted Koppel in an interview on *Nightline*,

...there was a bridge that you can see the World Trade Centers from. We’re actually only 10 or 15 miles from downtown New York here. It’s very close by water. And you cross this little bridge. And they always sat—they sat dead in the middle of it. And so towards the end of the day we got in the car and took a—you know, drove over it and they were gone, you know. And it made—somehow there was a realism from the TV images (ABC News, 2002).

Loder (2002) interpreted “Empty Sky” as an acknowledgment of the rage many New Yorkers felt after the collapse of Manhattan’s two towering landmarks: “I want a kiss from your lips/I want an eye for an eye/I woke up this morning to an empty sky.” Springsteen, however, commented that the lyrics should not be interpreted as a desire for revenge, only a feeling of frustration and loss (ABC News, 2002).

The most common interpretation placed upon “World’s Apart,” the seventh track on the album, is that of a relationship between a man and a woman from different cultures (Pyndus, 2002). With the integration of qawwali singer Asif Ali Khan and a Pakistani choir along with infectious chanting, this song conjures up images of love between an American soldier and an Islamic woman (Browne, 2002). “Practically pleading with his lover, ‘may the living let us in before the dead tear us apart’,

Springsteen acknowledges the uphill battle facing couples of different backgrounds while his guitar screams in frustration” (Pyndus, 2002, para. 9).

Rhythmically and lyrically track eight, “Let’s Be Friends (Skin to Skin),” is more akin to “Waitin’ On a Sunny Day.” It is an upbeat sing-a-long track that is enjoyable to listen to, but Pyndus (2002) suggested it did not fit with the other songs on the album. Although the lyrics suggest the coming together of two individuals, even on a sexual level, one could also interpret the call to be friends as a plea for the coming together of nations (Cherry, 2002).

“Further On (Up the Road)” (track 9) was played during the 1999/2000 Reunion Tour; however, it works on this album because it speaks to overcoming dark days and rising above (“One sunny mornin' we'll rise I know” (Springsteen, 2002c)) further on down the road of life. “If there's a light up ahead well brother I don't know/But I got this fever burnin' in my soul/So let's take the good times as they go/And I'll meet you further on up the road” (Springsteen, 2002c).

“The Fuse” (track 10) is a sexually charged piece that “is about making a physical connection in the face of emotional despair” (Cherry, 2002, para. 7). This track, like most of the others on the album, creates imagery of the tragedy with lines like “Trees on fire with the first fall's frost/Long black line in front of Holy Cross/Blood moon risin' in a sky of black dust” (Springsteen, 2002d). Springsteen stays true to the themes of the album throughout the work.

“Mary’s Place” (track 11) is an upbeat rock song that deals with finding happiness in the face of sorrow. The central character has lost a loved one but is trying to overcome

the grief by being with friends and enjoying life again while still holding on to the memories of the one who has passed (Sterdan, 2002).

I got seven pictures of Buddha/The prophet's on my tongue/Eleven angels of mercy/Sighin' over that black hole in the sun/My heart's dark but it's risin'/I'm pullin' all the faith I can see/From that black hole on the horizon/I hear your voice calling me/Let it rain, let it rain, let it rain/Let it rain, let it rain, let it rain, let it rain/Meet me at Mary's place, we're gonna have a party/Meet me at Mary's place, we're gonna have a party/Tell me how do we get this thing started/Meet me at Mary's place (Springsteen, 2002h).

“You’re Missing” (track 12) details the human emotions of a woman coping with the loss of her husband who perished in the World Trade Center collapse. This poignant selection is one of the few tracks that is devoid of hope for better days. The overarching theme of the album, to rise above, is “missing.” The absence of optimism on this track speaks to the hurt and angst of so many who lost loved ones in the attacks. The rawness of the song reflects the raw emotions that come with loss.

Pictures on the nightstand, TV's on in the den/Your house is waiting, your house is waiting/For you to walk in, for you to walk in/But you're missing, you're missing/You're missing when I shut out the lights/You're missing when I close my eyes/You're missing when I see the sun rise/You're missing (Springsteen, 2002o).

The title track of *The Rising* (track 13) captures all three themes with eloquence and force. The song acknowledges the sacrifice of a New York firefighter who perishes after entering the towers to try and save those trapped inside. However, Springsteen moves from a dark opening into “a hand-clapping, sanctified chorus, as the literal image

of a man rising up a smoke-filled stairwell merges into a religious image of ascension” (Binelli, 2002, p. 64). Springsteen said he was trying to describe the most powerful images of 9/11 and the one that stuck in his mind was that of the rescuers ascending the stairs of the Twin Towers. Ted Koppel suggested Springsteen might have had the resurrection in mind. Springsteen responded:

...I was a good Catholic boy when I was little, and so those images for me are always very close and they explain a lot about—a lot about life. And I knew—well I was trying to describe the most powerful images of the 11th, and that I’d read in the paper, was when some of the people coming down talked about the emergency workers who were ascending. And, you know, that—that image to me was just what—what I—an image I just felt left with after that particular day, the idea of those guys going up the stairs, up the stairs, ascending, ascending. They could be ascending a smoky staircase, you could be in the afterlife, moving—moving on (ABC News, 2002).

One of the most celebrated tracks on the album is “Paradise” (track 14). Segal (2002) called the track “the album's most shattering, challenging moment” (p. A17). Springsteen sings from the point of view of a female suicide bomber in the first part of the song. The bomber is ready to sacrifice herself and all the others around her so she can reach what she thinks will be heaven: “In the crowded marketplace/I drift from face to face/I hold my breath and close my eyes/I hold my breath and close my eyes/And I wait for paradise/And I wait for paradise” (Gardner, 2002; Springsteen, 2002k). In the second verse of the song the central character becomes a woman who lost her husband in the Pentagon attack (Gardner, 2002). Springsteen sings of someone who has suffered loss

and is left behind in the final verse of the track. The character in the third verse attempts to commit suicide by drowning him/herself in the river because he/she is so distraught over the loss of his/her beloved: “I sink 'neath the river cool and clear/Drifting down I disappear/I see you on the other side/I search for the peace in your eyes/But they're as empty as paradise/They're as empty as paradise” (Springsteen, 2002k). Yet, he/she aborts his/her attempt to kill him/herself because he/she realizes paradise is troubled, too.

Springsteen summed up “Paradise” as follows:

“So you have these two vignettes from completely different places. Then in the third verse, I imagined someone who had been left. The person goes into the river and goes under—and comes back up. It’s like saying, ‘We’re still here, and this is the only life we have’” (Gardner, 2002, p. 1D).

“My City of Ruins” (track 15), a song that was written about Springsteen’s adopted hometown of Asbury Park, NJ, aptly closes out the album. Although the original intent of the song was to gain support for rebuilding and revitalizing the struggling Jersey shore city, the lyrics are easily transferred and conjure up reflections of the devastation of 9/11. However, Springsteen ends the track with the uplifting and inspirational message that he has weaved throughout the album. He “urges his audience to summon the courage and faith to move forward and to ‘rise up’” (French, 2002, para. 15). Despite being written well before the tragic event, “My City of Ruins” is a fitting song to close out this tribute to the heroes of September 11th and instill hope and faith for the future.

The working class and religious images still resonate

Deconstruction questions like “What kind of lifestyle is presented?” and “What values are expressed?” are useful in helping understand if there is a negative glamorization of certain lifestyles and values. One could argue with little opposition that the lifestyles and values Springsteen sings about on *The Rising* and on most every other album is quite positive and representative of many hard working blue collar Americans. Throughout his career Springsteen has written many songs about the working class. He has tunes that deal with police officers, fire fighters, factory workers, migrant day laborers, construction workers, and steelworkers (Tyranigel, 2002). While Springsteen knows little about a 40-hour work week, he does know how it makes a person feel. While growing up he watched his father toil day in and day out and saw the toll a working man’s life can take on a person. But, Springsteen found faith and hope in his mother, an eternal optimist. It is this optimism that comes through loud and clear in his music. While the events of September 11th were horrific, Springsteen somehow managed on *The Rising* to take such a tragedy and offer hope for those working folks whose lives were forever changed because of those hijacked planes (Tyranigel, 2002). “The songs are sad, but the sadness is almost always matched with optimism, promises of redemption and calls to spiritual arms. There is more rising on *The Rising* than in a month of church” (Tyranigel, 2002, p. 53).

The redemption and call to spiritual arms permeates throughout *The Rising*. In fact, religious images and issues of faith and meaning have always been part of Springsteen’s music. *The Rising* has, perhaps,

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” (Kelly, 2003, para. 11).

Even though Springsteen is a non-practicing Catholic, the religious values he was taught as a child continue to influence him. On *The Rising* he does not support one type of religion, but rather invokes a universal spirituality that encompasses all religions, all peoples. The values of faith, hope, love, and peace poignantly manifest themselves on “Worlds Apart.”

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 that painful memories around loss of life do not serve to increase hatred and violence (Kelly, 2003, para. 18).

A healthy media message in a greater collage

Most rock music critics heralded Springsteen’s album with high praise and applauded its ability to capture the emotions of 9/11 while offering some sense of hope for the future. For all intents and purposes, the message of *The Rising* was a healthy media message, one that was embraced by legions of Americans. However, true deconstruction of this work would be remiss to discount other interpretations. Dissenters of Springsteen’s work on *The Rising* existed; most often critics took issue with individual

songs, whether lyrically or musically, as opposed to the album as a whole (Cherry, 2002; French, 2002; Loder, 2002; Petridis, 2002; Pyndus 2002; Tyrangiel, 2002). For instance, French (2002) took issue with “Countin’ On a Miracle.” “Maybe the fairy-tale imagery of the album’s worst track, the overly sappy “Countin’ On a Miracle,” would have been more acceptable had it been released immediately after 9/11, but its magic certainly isn’t working now” (para. 9). Cherry (2002) noted several flaws of the album. “Tracks like “Mary’s Place” (surefire concert favorite) and “Waitin’ On a Sunny Day” are undercut by joining downbeat lyrics with upbeat rhythms—a mistake also made on *Born in the U.S.A.*” (Cherry, 2002, para. 13). Petridis (2002) laments that Springsteen’s imagery is repetitive.

...but here the repetitions are highlighted by their proximity. A song in which the streets are cloudy with dust and flowing with blood, and the sky is empty and crying, is followed by a song in which the sky is cloudy with dust and raining blood, and the streets are empty and crying (Petridis, 2002, para. 6).

Pyndus (2002) suggested “Let’s Be Friends” was wrong for the album. “The song that sticks out like a sore thumb, both musically and thematically, is “Let’s Be Friends (Skin to Skin),” a sunny sing-a-long that’s fun to listen to, almost recalling the Jackson 5, but just doesn’t fit here” (Pyndus, 2002, para. 8). Despite such critical comments, it was difficult to identify critics who did not laud Springsteen for a sincere work that tried to capture the horror of 9/11 while conjuring up faith for better days ahead.

Sanchez (2002) took issue, not so much with Springsteen’s work, but with the accolades bestowed on *The Rising* by the leading rock critics around the nation.

Like near-sighted lemmings, the critics rushed to applaud *The Rising*, giving little attention to the work of other artists addressing 9/11, as if Springsteen ushered in a new era of musical social criticism or a more valid musical witness to 9/11. A form of cultural imperialism, this universal praise underlines the serious lack of diversity within circles of popular music critics (Sanchez, 2002, para. 1).

Sanchez (2002) commented that turning off *The Rising* before the record is finished is a selfish act because there is emotional guilt for not hearing out the stories of those whose lives were touched so tragically by the events of that fateful Tuesday.

A sort of emotional blackmail, the record does not belong to Bruce or the E Street Band, it belongs to the wives, sons, daughters, brothers, friends, and families of those who now celebrate an anniversary of loss every September 11th (Sanchez, 2002, para. 5).

Although attempting to illustrate that the record may not live up to the high praise from all of the critics, Sanchez makes a profound point in favor of the album. It is not Springsteen's voice that is heard, it is those who lost their colleagues, friends, and loved ones. It is the voices of those who relive that horror each day that ring loud and clear through his music.

The one point that Sanchez (2002) made that does resonate and is important in the deconstruction of this body of work is that *The Rising* is not the only attempt, maybe not even the best attempt, to put some sort of meaning on such senseless acts of violence. Other artists offered their interpretations, and for many these works offered healing in the wake of the emotional wounds left by the collapse of those giant pillars of American commerce. Outkast, Toby Keith, Alan Jackson, Anti-Flag, Neil Young, Paul McCartney,

and Steve Earle were among several who weighed in on that day of reckoning (Sanchez, 2002). In sum, Sanchez (2002) argued that *The Rising* is just one piece of the popular music puzzle that responded to September 11th.

The Rising is an attempted portrait of a defining moment in American history. Critics would say it is the most true to life portrait produced thus far. But to believe this one recording captures that day is to be stuck in a vacuum, unable to turn off the television, leave the room, peer out the window and see that life goes on. Such acclaim further conditions acceptable responses, reactions, and emotions. If *The Rising* is the defining response to 9/11 within popular music, then there has been no distance gained for reflection and dissent is something best not discussed. Despite the critic's words, *The Rising* is merely a good starting point in regards to responses within popular music to 9/11. Think of it as another piece in a greater collage (Sanchez, 2002, para. 7).

National media coverage spotlights the work but creates skeptics

As part of the deconstruction process it is important to examine the target audience of the mediated message. The audience for *The Rising*, one might argue, is epitomized in Rumson, New Jersey, resident Edwin R. Sutphin, Jr. He is the man who crossed paths with the Boss in a nightclub parking lot in Sea Bright, New Jersey, and sent out his plea, "We need you now," just after the 9/11 tragedy (Volpe, 2002, para. 2). Sutphin had lost his childhood friend, David Bauer, who worked on the 105th floor of the north tower of the World Trade Center (Volpe, 2002). Sutphin in many ways represents every person who lost a loved one in the attacks or who was touched by the tragedy.

Springsteen's album was for everyone because it offered comfort and hope. "His (Springsteen's) music is one of the things that I think has helped me through this whole ordeal," Sutphin, said. 'I really respect what he's done for the community and the metropolitan area and the country'" (Volpe, 2002, para. 7).

Springsteen, who in earlier years was reluctant to give a lot of interviews, took a new approach to marketing *The Rising*. Not since 1984's *Born in the U.S.A.* had Springsteen targeted mainstream America so heavily.

Here, after decades of relative reclusiveness, Springsteen was suddenly everywhere in the mass media: taking over the *Today* show in Asbury Park, on David Letterman two nights in a row, ditto Ted Koppel, on MTV, VH1, *Saturday Night Live*, simultaneous covers of *Time* and *Rolling Stone*, long interviews with the *New York Times*, the *LA Times*, and *USA Today* (Alterman, 2004, p. 374).

The massive media coverage of the release of *The Rising* had skeptics questioning Springsteen's motive behind the album. Such skepticism is, in essence, healthy media literacy deconstruction at work. A media literate consumer should ask who is paying for the media message, what does the producer of the message want to get out of the promotion of the message, and how sincere is the message in light of heavy mass marketing to the American public? Alterman (2004) argues that "the dilemma for anyone who seeks to use popular culture to communicate a message at odds with its market-driven heart of darkness is: who's using whom?" (p. 374). Springsteen was questioned on the *Today* show about the fact that some might suggest he was exploiting the tragedy. His response was that each person should listen to the music and make up his/her own mind (Alterman, 2004). Alterman (2004) agreed:

The answer has to be a personal one. In Asbury Park, I did some random interviewing of people who had traveled many hours, and waited on overnight lines, in the hope of seeing Springsteen perform four songs in the Convention Hall for the *Today* broadcast. I spoke to a firefighter who had gone into the burning buildings, a 16-year-old girl who was repaying her mom for waiting 10 hours on line to get 'NSync tickets, a woman with her 5-year-old son, who back in '85, enlisted her entire family in a week-long wait for tickets. Nobody mentioned the media. Nobody mentioned the marketing campaign. Nobody complained about the all-night wait and the uncertainty that they would be allowed inside the hall. They were there for Bruce because Bruce was there for them (p. 375).

If anything the media coverage contributed to the healing process because it exposed more and more people to the work that Springsteen and his band mates had created. The tragedy was dealt with in a sincere and meaningful way, and offered a way for individuals to cope and find strength to move forward by keeping the faith.

Springsteen's perspective reveals sincerity

To further illustrate the sincerity of Springsteen's work and to discount those skeptics that suggested Springsteen exploited a national tragedy for his own gain, additional deconstruction will provide a better understanding of Springsteen's perspective when he wrote *The Rising*. Although the notion of perspective is not overtly identified as a deconstruction question by the NMMLP, it is embedded in almost all of the queries suggested by the media literacy activist organization. Knowing something about

Springsteen's perspective when he wrote most of the songs on the album provides a much clearer understanding of the literal and underlying messages.

In the days that followed the hijacked planes hitting the World Trade Center, Springsteen opened the *America: A Tribute to Heroes* telethon with "My City of Ruins," as noted above. He played a few other local benefit concerts, but basically grieved like everyone else (Tyranigel, 2002). However, the inspiration for songs seemed to come after Springsteen read several obituaries in the *New York Times* about those who lost their lives in the tragedy. He found the *New York Times* obituaries "'to be very, very meaningful--incredibly powerful'" (Tyranigel, 2002, p. 56). Springsteen noticed that many of the victims had one of his songs played at their memorial service or they had a stack of old Springsteen concert tickets they had been keeping in a closet or drawer. With his inspiration for song writing elevated, Springsteen turned into a reporter to better understand the intimacies of September 11th. Springsteen called several of the victims' families to find out more about their loved ones. Joe Farrelly was a fire fighter for Manhattan Engine Co. 4 and a lifelong Springsteen fan. His widow, Stacey, got a call from Springsteen after he had read about Joe in the *New York Times*. "They talked for 40 minutes. 'After I got off the phone with him, the world just felt a little smaller. I got through Joe's memorial and a good month and a half on that phone call'" (Tyranigel, 2002, p. 56). Springsteen wanted no accolades for being a kind-hearted human being, but his conversation with Stacey Farrelly and others helped shape the album and gave a more intimate portrait of the courage and bravery and humanness of those that sacrificed their lives to save others. Suzanne Berger, who lost her husband, Jim, spoke with Springsteen and recounted how Jim had rescued dozens of people from the south tower before it

eventually collapsed on him. These stories were among the many that gave Springsteen direction on the album.

In terms of deconstruction, it is clear that Springsteen's intention was not to capitalize monetarily on this tragedy of epic proportions. Some were uncomfortable with marketing the album as a September 11th album and having it come on the heels of the tragedy, but Springsteen addressed this charge and reiterated his sincerity in this album as well as all of his others.

“When you're putting yourself into shoes you haven't worn, you have to be very ... just very thoughtful, is the way that I'd put it. Just thoughtful. You call on your craft, and you go searching for it, and hopefully what makes people listen is that over the years you've been serious and honest. That's where your creative authority comes from. That's how people know you're not just taking a ride” (Tyrangiel, 2002, p. 58).

Springsteen truly wanted to pay tribute to the heroes and their families and offer them hope the best way he knew how: through the message of song. In his songs, Springsteen was poignant, realistic, and inspirational. His album helped with the healing process not only for the families, but for the nation as well.

CONCLUSION

As noted early in this discussion, one of the fundamental elements of media literacy is that an individual constructs his/her own meaning from a media message. There is no right or wrong when it comes to deconstruction, but effective deconstruction is guided by universal questions that offer a systematic framework for decoding,

evaluating, and analyzing media messages. Several of these basic deconstruction queries have been diligently applied here in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the impact and influence of Springsteen's work. Whether other conclusions about Springsteen's album, *The Rising*, are consistent or divergent with those offered here is not an issue; the more important issue is that effective media literacy skills have been employed and that evaluation and analysis has taken place to, hopefully, help foster a more media literate society.

An overall summation of this deconstruction suggests that the message Springsteen brought to the American people was sincere, healthy, and rich with universal values of faith, hope, and love. Unlike other mediated messages that have hidden meanings and agendas, Springsteen's work was clearly an artist's answer to a call from his audience to help them cope with the worst terrorist attack on American soil in history. His artistry was reflective, touching, and hopeful. Despite those who criticized his mass marketing efforts, it was these efforts that brought his music to the American public and gave them the opportunity to listen and to heal.

References

- ABC News. (2002, July 30). *Nightline* [Television broadcast]. New York: American Broadcasting Company.
- Alterman, E. (2004). from It ain't no sin to be glad you're alive: The promise of Bruce Springsteen (Appendix: Spanish edition 2003). In June Skinner Sawyers (Ed.), *Racing in the street: The Bruce Springsteen reader* (pp.371-375). New York: Penguin Group.
- Aufderheide, P. (1993). *Media literacy: A report of the national leadership conference on media literacy*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 365 294)
- Binelli, M. (2002, August 22). Bruce Springsteen's American gospel: Looking for the light in the darkness of September 11th, Springsteen takes to the rock & roll pulpit on "The Rising." *Rolling Stone*, 903, 62-68.
- Bird, R. (2002, November 7). Springsteen's rock helps us heal. *The Cincinnati Post (Online Edition)*. Retrieved December 1, 2003, from www.cincypost.com/2002/11/07/bruce110702.html
- Brown, D. (2002, July 29). Review: Springsteen relevant in 'Rising' [Review of the album Bruce Springsteen *The Rising*]. *CNN.com*. Retrieved December 1, 2003, from <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/SHOWBIZ/Music/07/29/ew.rec.mus.rising/>
- Cherry, K. M. (2002, July 29). Come on up for the rising: The latest from the Boss. [Review of the album Bruce Springsteen *The Rising*]. *National Review Online*. Retrieved December 1, 2003, from <http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-cherry072902.asp>

French, B. (2002). [Review of the album Bruce Springsteen *The Rising*]. *Nude as the News*. Retrieved November 28, 2003, from

<http://www.nudeasthenews.com/reviews/1085>

Gardner, E. (2002, July 15). Springsteen's 'Rising'. *USA Today*, p. 1D.

Heins, M., & Cho, C. (2003). *Media literacy: An alternative to censorship*. New York: Free Expression Policy Project. Retrieved December 16, 2003, from

<http://www.fepproject.org/policyreports/medialiteracy.pdf>

Kelly, P. (2003). 'The Rising' of Bruce Springsteen. *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, 188(4) [Electronic version]. Retrieved September 2, 2005, from

<http://www.americamagazine.org/gettext.cfm?articleTypeID=1&textID=2772&issueID=421>

Loder, K. (2002, August 22). Gimme shelter: Springsteen searches for love and faith in the ruins. [Review of the album Bruce Springsteen *The Rising*]. *Rolling Stone*, 903, 81-82.

New Mexico Media Literacy Project. (2005a). *About NMMLP*. Retrieved August 18, 2005, from <http://www.nmmlp.org/nmmlp.htm>

New Mexico Media Literacy Project. (2005b). *Deconstruction*. Retrieved August 25, 2005, from <http://www.nmmlp.org/deconstruction.htm>

Petridis, A. (2002, July 26). Darkness on the edge of town: The Boss pays tribute to September 11—again and again and again [Review of the album Bruce Springsteen *The Rising*]. *The Guardian*. Retrieved December 2, 2003, from

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/critic/review/0,1169,763774,00.html>

Pyndus, D. (2002, August 9). [Review of the album Bruce Springsteen *The Rising*]. *Popmatters.com*. Retrieved November 26, 2003, from <http://www.popmatters.com/music/reviews/s/springsteenbruce-rising.shtml>

Tyrangiel, J. (2002, August 5). Bruce rising: An intimate look at how Springsteen turned 9/11 into a message of hope. *Time*, 160(6), 52-59.

Sanchez, G. (2002, October 16). Popular music after 9/11: Putting politics into verse. *frictionmagazine.com* Retrieved August 24, 2005, from <http://frictionmagazine.com/song/news/911music.asp>.

Segal, D. (2002, July 30). Pop painkiller: On *The Rising*, Springsteen offers healing balm with a short shelf life. *The Washington Post (Final Edition)*, p. A17.

Springsteen, B. (2002a). Countin' on a miracle. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002b). Empty sky. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002c). Further on (up the road). On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002d). The fuse. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002e). Into the fire. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002f). Let's be friends (skin to skin). On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002g). Lonesome day. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002h). Mary's place. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002i). My city of ruins. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002j). Nothing man. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002k). Paradise. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002l). The rising. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002m). Waitin' on a sunny day. Rising. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002n). Worlds apart. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Springsteen, B. (2002o). You're missing. On *The Rising* [CD]. New York: Columbia Records.

Sterdan, D. (2002, July 26). The Boss rises on E Street. [Review of the album Bruce Springsteen *The Rising*]. *Winnipeg Sun*. Retrieved December 1, 2003, from http://64.233.161.104/search?q=cache:M5ogPWsYfvMJ:www.canoe.ca/JamAlbumsS/springsteen_rising-sun.html+the+rises+on+E+street+sterdan&hl=en

Stout, A. K. (2002, August 2). Springsteen answers call with "The Rising"
[Review of the album Bruce Springsteen *The Rising*]. *Music on the Menu*. Retrieved
December 1, 2003, from <http://www.musiconthemenu.com/>

Volpe, G. J. (2002, July 31). Rumson man inspired Boss. *Asbury Park Press*.
Retrieved September 3, 2005, from
<http://orig.app.com/springsteen/story/0,2314,596681,00.html>