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January 26, 2014: How the Christian Story Works

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Title: How the Christian Story Works

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1/26/2014—I apologize to my readers for becoming fixated on Christianity, but that can happen when you read Karl Barth. When I say that Christianity works, I mean that believers have access to good and true aspects of reality that nonbelievers have to work to gain any understanding of.

Here is an example. In a recent edition of the New York Review of Books—that source again—Wyatt Mason [reviews](#) Tenth of December by George Saunders. This longish short story, which is the name of the collection, concerns a mortally ill man who plans to commit suicide rather than go through any more pain and humiliation. Eventually he finds himself rescued by others, though he will successfully die, and comes to appreciate the life he has in a new way:

What a thing! To go from dying in your underwear in the snow to this!... It was something. Every second was something. He hadn't died in his shorts by a pond in the snow. The kid wasn't dead. He'd killed no one. Ha! Somehow he'd got it all back. Everything was good now, everything was—

The woman reached down, touched his scar.

Oh, wow, ouch, she said. You didn't do that out there, did you?

At this he remembered that the brown spot was as much in his head as ever.

Oh, Lord, there was still all that to go through.

Did he still want it? Did he still want to live?

Yes, yes, oh, God, yes, please.

But Eber will not live, neither happily ever et cetera, nor much longer. So he wonders:

If some guy, at the end, fell apart, and said or did bad things, or had to be helped, helped to quite a considerable extent? So what? What of it?... Why should the shit not run down his legs?

Why should those he loved not lift and bend and feed and wipe him, when he would gladly do the same for them? He'd been afraid to be lessened by the lifting and bending and feeding and wiping, and was still afraid of that, and yet, at the same time, now saw that there could still be many—many drops of goodness, is how it came to him—many drops of happy—of good fellowship—ahead, and those drops of fellowship were not—had never been—his to withhold. Withhold.

That last mistake is his brain misfiring due to disease and the suicide.

Christianity teaches exactly this—that we can love ourselves even in our weakness and humiliation and thus allow others to help us without the false pride that robs us of the possibility of human solidarity. But this noble perspective is a result of understanding that God himself was willing to undergo weakness and humiliation for us. God loves us as we are. We don't have to pretend to be more than we are.

This liberating perspective is about the best thing I know. Secularists like me are filled with all kinds of false pride—that we follow reason, that we lack prejudice etc. You just cannot build a community out of such lies. We are lying to ourselves about ourselves. And the result is that we would rather commit suicide than expose ourselves as we truly are.

The question is, is it possible to acknowledge that the Christian perspective is better and truer and to learn from it? Once the story is learned, can it be practiced without its premise? Or, without its premise quite as Christianity understands it? Jesus was willing to die on the cross for us. That much seems historically true. Is that enough?