

“What Do You Get When You Cross a Short Story with the Gospel?”

Précis of a presentation

by Rev. Dr. Marcus Felde of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Indianapolis, Indiana,
at the Crossings Seminar at Belleville, Illinois, January 25, 2011: “How Is Jesus Good for You, Really?”

[I am sorry that I am not able to reproduce my talk, which was filled with animadversions and other diversions. What follows should give you a rough idea of what I was up to.]

I propose that a useful means of doing the “tracking” and “crossing” which are part of the Crossings paradigm for getting the Gospel of Jesus Christ into people’s lives, might be to use short fiction as a source to illuminate the predicament(s) which the Gospel addresses.

At Bethlehem Lutheran Church, for the past year or so, our men’s Bible study group has been reading a series of short stories pulled from current issues of *The New Yorker* magazine. We have read about twenty stories, spending two-three weeks on each. We have renamed our group *Tuesdays with Story* to give some idea of what we are up to. (We meet every Tuesday morning at 6:30 AM.)

I have found that the stories are rich lodes of insight into human nature and relationships, and the problems which beset us. The characters in the story, even though they are often exaggerated and live in very different contexts than ourselves, bear many of the same burdens and ask many of the same questions as we do, seasonally adjusted.

We spend most of our time discussing the stories, always in a fairly casual manner. As we feel like it, we offer anecdotes or opinions. Towards the end of the hour, I generally make an effort to make a link to Christian faith, if it has not already been brought up.

At this point in our study’s history, I have not used the Crossings matrix in a deliberate manner to “track,” as we say, how God’s law might be operative at three levels in the people of the story. I am conscious of that, though, and sometimes my comments or commentary are heavily dependent on it.

[There is also a Women’s Bible Study which meets only twice a month, has recently begun reading some of these stories. In that group, I have deliberately used Celebrate inserts with the three lessons for that week, in order to make a connection between the two.]

The stories we have read for our Tuesday morning sessions are:

Indianapolis (Highway 74), by Sam Shephard
Alone, by Yiyun Li
A Death in Kitchawank, by T. Coraghessan Boyle
Free Fruit for Young Widows, by Nathan Englander
Baptizing the Gun, by Uwem Akpan (a Nigerian RC priest)
Trailhead, by E.O. Wilson
Hopefulness, by Ryan Mecklenburg (from *The Atlantic*)
Edgemont Drive, by E.L. Doctorow
War Dances, by Sherman Alexie
Victory Lap, by George Saunders
The Use of Poetry, by Ian McEwan
Uncle Rock, by Dagoberto Gilb
Foster, by Claire Keegan
Agreeable, by Jonathan Franzen
All That, by David Foster Wallace

An Arranged Marriage, by Nell Freudenberger
Premium Harmony, by Stephen King
To the Measures Fall, by Richard Powers
Blue Roses, by Frances Hwang
I.D., by Joyce Carol Oates
The Trojan Prince, by Tessa Hadley
Birdsong, by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The story "Victory Lap" was the subject of my comments and some discussion during the Crossings Seminar. That is because after we had read George Saunders' story we had some correspondence with him which resulted in our having the privilege (next month) of hearing him read that story at nearby Butler University. He will also be our guest for a breakfast the next morning. We look forward to meeting an author whose work we enjoyed and found so stimulating.

My discussing that story here would not be meaningful without some knowledge of the story, so I will make only limited remarks specific to it.

The very title "Victory Lap" suggests that (at least) one of the characters in the story obtains a victory, and that is what we find. The young man, Kyle, rises above a very legalistic, rulebound life within which he has certain limitations and definite rewards (albeit small); in order to rescue his neighbor, a girl who has been his friend since sandbox days, from an abductor/rapist. He is victorious over his internal fear of breaking the rules, gallantly and speedily effecting her rescue. She, in turn, rescues him from the ignominy of becoming "someone who has killed a guy," by overcoming her fear to yell at him and prevent him from gratuitously smashing in the downed villain's head.

For Crossing purposes, it would be necessary to ask whether within the confines of the story the victories that are obtained are sufficient for all the problems we find. In fact, from our perspective, no. The evil in the world is only slightly dented by the "beautiful" thing the kids have done by being so good. Kyle returns to a morally stunted household, she to her nightmares. And the thug, well, he goes to jail very badly injured.

The author may see this as the best *he* can offer, in all honesty, in a world which an awful lot of "undeserved misery" (his words) in it. Do we? Is not the even more magnanimous mercy shown to us by God in Jesus Christ somewhat similar to the restraint shown by Kyle at the last moment, in not killing someone we might wish he would just go ahead and kill? Is there hope for these people?

If there is not, then there is no hope for you and me, either. And our hope is not *only* that people will stop trying to abduct girls, but that people will be (and act like) children of a Father who makes us all brothers and sisters by sending his Son to rescue us. Christ runs a "victory lap" himself, binding the strong forces that make us prisoner . . . (You can do this just as well as I can.)

Such a *segue* from short story to the Good News may seem to do violence to the story. But our purpose in reading such stories is not merely to enjoy them, but to see in their light what God was going on about in Christ. Perhaps through seeing ourselves in the stories, we may learn better to see ourselves in Scripture itself, especially when Scripture uses law-language that we are experienced at dodging. The people in these stories *are us*. We know in our bones what Kyle dreads, when he fears being "ruined" by what he has done, or almost did.

I personally regard the reading of short fiction as a superb means of getting at the left hand of the Crossings matrix, the law side. I do not espouse drawing on the stories as a means of elucidating the right side of the matrix, because I think the temptation would be great to turn the story into a moralistic tale, with the ending being: everyone please act like the hero in this story. That is even true if the hero

of a story like George Saunders's "Escape from Spiderhead" actually sacrifices himself in order to save—or keep from being forced to kill—someone else. (Interestingly, he seems to save himself there by, becoming for an instant someone who has never killed anyone—although he had, as a youth.)

I commend this experience to others. I do not think it depends much on what story you choose, if it has a rich, nuanced, compelling, insightful perspective on human life, it should work. If anything, I would recommend against using stories which offer too easy a link to Jesus' death on the cross, or even baptism, like Uwem Akpan's "Baptizing the Gun," in which . . . Hey, look it up for yourself. A subscription to *The New Yorker* is surprisingly cheap.

Plus, there are cartoons!