

Feelings and faith

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [August 5, 2015](#) issue



Joy shapes one of Riley's memories in *Inside Out* while other animated emotions stand by.

*Inside Out* shouldn't have worked as a children's movie. Its theme—personified emotions on a quest through the human mind—suggests a surreal indie experiment or a Woody Allen movie gone awry. Yet *Inside Out* is one of the best movies I've seen this year.

Through animation, the filmmakers bend the laws of time and space to take the viewer on a tour through the mind of 11-year-old Riley. We visit the brightly colored labyrinth of long-term memory storage, the carefully guarded fortress of the subconscious (accessed along a treacherous cliff leading to permanent forgetfulness), the warehouse of abstract thought, and the surreal enchantment of imagination land. The result is a visual delight and an animated marvel.

While this sounds like a psychology textbook, children and adults love it. My five-year-old was amused when Anger blew his top, and when Fear flung himself around like a wet noodle. I wept openly when Riley felt as if her goofball dad had become an embarrassing stranger who didn't understand her. The emotions in this movie are more than theories or allegories.

The emotions that drive Riley's personality—Joy, Sadness, Anger, Disgust, and Fear—interact with events in her life, shaping her perception of these events and her memory of significant moments. If Joy is at the control panel, Riley remembers an event as a happy one. But if Sadness touches the memory, it will be permanently tinged with grief. Powerful emotions trigger core memories, and core memories shape Riley's personality. When Riley scores a hockey goal, for example, the joy and elation she feels triggers a love for hockey (this becomes "Hockey Island" in the landscape of her mind).

The idea that feelings shape our personalities is consistent with contemporary child development theory and progressive parenting advice. But as I watched *Inside Out*, I found myself thinking not about the latest parenting books but about Augustine's assertion that we are what we love and what we hate.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine meditated on how joy, anger, sadness, delight, and disgust shaped his journey to Christian faith and his memories of key events along the way. By the time of his conversion, he had accepted the intellectual truth of Christian claims. But he did not feel converted until he was overcome by both sadness and delight.

We see this elsewhere in Christian tradition. Jonathan Edwards wrote hundreds of sermons defending the necessary place of emotions in religion. In Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, John Ames returns again and again to a memory of his father offering him a charred biscuit after a church fire; the accompanying emotions connected the memory to his understanding of the Christian Eucharist.

When I think back on my own evangelical upbringing (many parts of which I have left behind), my attachment to the faith was largely formed in the mingling of emotion and memory. In middle school, I persuaded myself to respond kindly to a girl who tried to trick me into sitting in bubblegum. The surge of joy I felt when I overcame my own hurt feelings built something like "Christian Charity Island" in my personality. The night in youth group when I used Ephesians 6 to name a fear of bullying was the birth of "Biblical Imagination Island." For years, parents, teachers, and youth group leaders had taught me the value of Christian charity and the power of scripture to shape my life. Only in an emotional response to a particular situation did these ideas come alive and form part of my sense of self.

I'd like to think that these core memories extend beyond the angst of early adolescence to deep, rich connections to the faith. As I have grown into a more adult faith, though, and found spiritual sustenance in traditions that do not prize emotion so openly, I wonder how to foster the connection between memory, emotion, and personality in the life of faith.

A movie that features a giant clown crashing through the walls of the subconscious and an imaginary friend powering a magic stardust wagon can't answer these questions. But *Inside Out* does invite us to think more fully, and more playfully, about the interplay of emotion, memory, and personality. For people deeply invested in the way the tradition takes root in our lives, it may be an invitation to think more faithfully as well.