

When Joy gets complicated

By [Lee Hull Moses](#)

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It's rare for me to see a film in the theater the weekend it opens. But there were several reasons I wanted to see *Inside Out*—Pixar's latest creation, in which the emotions inside a pre-teen girl's mind are anthropomorphized and sent on adventures—last Friday afternoon. It was hot and it had been a long week, so sitting in a cool theater and not talking to anybody for a couple of hours sounded good. Also, I'm doing a movie-themed sermon series later this summer and could use

some inspiration.

Perhaps most significantly, I live with a seven-year-old girl whose mind is often a mystery to me. I was intrigued by the possibility that Pixar might offer some insight into what is happening inside that little head.

So we went, my daughter and I, and I was not disappointed. The air-conditioned theater was lovely. The movie was fun and funny, and it provided plenty to think about as a preacher and a parent.

The plot is simple: 11-year-old Riley and her family move across the country, and she has to deal with the grief of leaving her friends and the anxiety of starting a new life. Not much of a storyline on the face of it, but emotions are always more complex under the surface. Inside Riley's head, her feelings—specifically Sadness, Fear, Anger, Disgust, and Joy (who I couldn't help but picture as Leslie Knope, voiced as she was by the amazing Amy Poehler)—don't deal well with all the changes Riley's going through. Soon her core memories, all originally joyful, are in danger of turning sad. Joy and Sadness find themselves on a quest to save Riley's personality before all the transitions change her forever.

There is fodder here for several sermons. On the role of anger in fighting injustice. On fear, and the reality that God tells us not to be afraid because we are not alone, not because there's nothing to be afraid of. On lament—there's a beautiful moment when Sadness sits down with another character and simply lets him cry for awhile. On happiness—when the always-cheerful Joy thinks all hope is lost and breaks down in tears, we're reminded that joy is a complicated emotion.

The passing of time and the maturation of emotions is a constant theme through the film, and as we watched I wondered how my daughter was processing all that. I'm acutely aware that she's growing up and leaving some of her childhood behind all the time—but is she? After the movie, as we walked to the car in the hot sunlight, I asked her what she thought, but I could tell she wasn't ready to talk about it.

I wasn't either, really. For an animated children's movie, it's pretty heavy. I'm not a movie-crier, but there were times I teared up—such as when Riley's old imaginary friend Bing-Bong shows up, tucked away in the basement with the memories she has no use for anymore. I won't spoil it by telling you what happens, but let's just say I wished I had a tissue.

The movie's not perfect. The journey into “Abstract Thought” is clever but goes on a little long and is a little too heady (excuse the pun) for a kids movie. There’s one exchange between the parents—in a rare glimpse inside their heads—that erodes into terrible gender stereotypes. (And why couldn’t it be the *mother’s* job that necessitates the cross-country move?)

One opportunity the movie misses—understandably; there are only so many life lessons you can cram into a 90-minute film—is a chance to explore how memories are held in community. Riley may forget her imaginary friend and their moon-bound rocket ship, but I bet her mother doesn’t. When I asked my daughter after the movie if she remembered her own imaginary friend, I could tell from her answer that she only remembered the stories we’d told her; she didn’t remember the friendship itself. That’s okay. Sometimes it’s the child’s job to let go of old memories in order to make room for the new. Our task is to hold the old ones and to remind her that she was young once, and rode on imaginary rocket ships to the stars.

In all, *Inside Out* offers a delightful glimpse into the complicated wonderland of our inner self. It reminds us that even once-joyful memories now tinged with the sadness of time and change are worth keeping around, for they help us become who we already are.