

Second thoughts: Truth and misconception

by [Maggi Dawn](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

Recently my son and I read one of Roald Dahl's fantastic stories for children—*The BFG*. Everyone knows, don't they, that giants are terrible, bloodthirsty creatures? So when little Sophie is kidnapped by a giant in the middle of the night and carried far away to a land where giants live, naturally she is terrified. "He is getting ready to eat me, she tells herself. He will probably eat me raw, just as I am. Or perhaps he will boil me first."

But as the story unfolds, Sophie discovers that her giant is in fact the Big Friendly Giant, the antithesis of all her fears. Gradually she begins to realize that all the things she expects to be horrifying are in fact benign. What she saw and what she thought she saw were not the same thing at all.

The recent release of the film *Atonement* took me back to Ian McEwan's novel—one of my favorite reads of the past few years. This is another tale of misinterpretation. Thirteen-year-old Briony walks into a library and witnesses something outside her youthful understanding, and wrongly condemns someone. The remainder of the book is about her own act of atonement. What she saw and what she thought she saw were not the same thing.

We don't normally turn to novels or children's fiction to search for spiritual wisdom, but it's often the case that fresh insight on matters of faith comes to us from oblique places, as if God is sometimes able to penetrate our hearts and minds more easily from an indirect angle. These two stories set me thinking about the way that the journey of faith involves repeated correction of misconceptions that we bring with us.

Encountering God in depth inevitably means that we have to unlearn a lot of ideas that are deeply ingrained in us, but which may be at odds with the truth. We draw our idea of God from a mixture of sources, often unconsciously; from childhood experiences, from media, from things we have heard or misheard in church, read or

misread in the scriptures. This collection of ideas is the baggage we bring with us to faith, so that God becomes, in our experience, a mixture of truth and misconception. The God we expect to meet may not be the God we actually encounter.

Genesis 22 tells the story of Abraham going up a mountain to worship, believing that God was asking him to sacrifice his own beloved son. It's thought that child sacrifice was common in Abraham's time and culture, so perhaps, despite a heavy heart, it seemed an acceptable idea. Only when he arrived at the place of sacrifice did he realize that the appalling specter of child sacrifice was not within the kindness of God. Like Abraham, we absorb cultural assumptions about religion and project them onto God, then believe that God expects us to make painful and even destructive sacrifices for the sake of religious principles. It's not uncommon for people to stay too long in abusive and destructive relationships because they believe they are required by God to be faithful; or to devote years to deadening church situations because they believe they are called to stay; or to pursue ideas of vocation with a stoicism that is born not of love but of fear. Of course, faithfulness to families and communities is an important reflection of the nature of God. But like Abraham on Mount Moriah, we need to identify the humane limits to what God demands of us, and to see that sometimes the sacrifices we set out to make are born of our misconceptions, not of God's call.

Allowing our idea of God to change and grow is no easy task. There are times when I have held on for dear life to ideas I believed were central to my faith, only to grow slowly into the realization that I was mistaken. When I was taking my first degree in theology, most of the building blocks of my faith came up for serious reexamination. I asked one of my professors how it was possible for faith to survive this kind of intense intellectual scrutiny. He thought for a while, then said, "Once upon a time I believed in a great many things. Now I believe only in a few things, but I believe in them more deeply than I ever thought possible. That God exists, that God is love, and that Jesus is the son of God—these things I believe. Everything else is up for debate."

I never forgot his words, and as I began to allow my own, rather stern vision of God to be mellowed, the God who always demanded a little more than I was able to give began to give way to a God who breathed love and kindness and freedom into my heart.

The journey into God gradually dislodges our deep-seated ideas and replaces or refines them as we gain a clearer focus on the truth of who God is. Like Briony, we

discover that things we thought we saw and understood were not what they seemed; like Sophie, we discover that the fearsome and bloodthirsty giants of our imagination are nothing like the just and kind God of reality.