

But I am not Abraham

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [February 2, 2000](#) issue

For some time now I have been both attracted to and troubled by the story of Abraham's journey to present his son Isaac as a burnt offering in the land of Moriah. I was moved by Abraham's extraordinary devotion to God but repelled by the thought that it made him willing to sacrifice his only child. So I turned with considerable interest to an article in a recent issue of the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*. In discussing Kierkegaard's reading of the story, Murray Rea argues there that "while no justification of Abraham's action . . . may be offered, he is nevertheless to be admired for trusting in God beyond the limits of his understanding." Such trust is admirable, however, Rea went on to say, "only in the context of a long life of obedience and love."

I was reading the text and silently nodding to myself in agreement. When I turned to the last page, I saw a drawing of a small hand. A few days earlier I had been "reading" the journal with my son Nathanael, then 20 months old. Bored because there were no pictures of cars or animals, he decided to help the editors out and add some spice to the journal. "Daddy, *ruka* [which means "hand" in Croatian]," he said while placing his hand on the white portion of the page at the end of the article. I took a pencil and sketched the outline of his tiny fingers.

"Would you have done it?" Nathanael asked me, having grown in my imagination to about 12, the age when Isaac could have carried the wood for the sacrifice.

"No, son," I quickly responded, shuddering at the very thought of it. "I would never have done it."

"But weren't you agreeing with Mr. Rea?"

"Yes, but I am not Abraham."

"And what if God told you to 'offer your only son, Nathanael, whom you love'? Wouldn't you obey God?"

“It is not so easy to recognize God’s voice. Do you remember the story of Samuel? He thought his old master was calling him, when in fact God was speaking to him. Mostly it happens the other way around.”

“Yes, but Samuel was then only a boy.”

“If I heard a voice telling me to offer you as a burnt offering, I wouldn’t believe it was God’s. I can’t help but think that Kant was partly right.”

“Kant?”

“Yes, Immanuel Kant, the famous philosopher. He thought Abraham should have responded to the voice by saying, ‘It is quite certain that I ought not to kill my innocent son, but I am not certain and I cannot ever become certain that you, the ‘you’ who is appearing to me, are God.’”

“Kant thought that Abraham was wrong, but you think Abraham was right?”

“Yes, Kant was wrong about Abraham. Not all journeys into the realm beyond ethics are forbidden. But Kant would have been right, had he been talking about almost anyone else. Compared to Abraham, I am spiritually a little boy who does not know.”

“Oh, come on, Dad! You are a big man and you teach theology at Yale!”

“No, Nathanael, Abraham was among the greatest of the great. God tells him to leave the land of his parents—don’t you get any ideas! He obeys, and it turns out to have been the right thing to do. God tells him that he will have a son, even though physically he and Sarah could not have children, and Isaac is born. Abraham knew how to hear God. See, his ability to recognize God’s voice and his willingness to trust God reinforced each other.”

“You mean that when Abraham told Isaac that ‘God will provide the lamb,’ he was not pulling the wool over his eyes?”

“I don’t think he was. Abraham knew two things: he knew that God spoke to him and he knew that he could trust God.”

“Did Abraham then obey while knowing all along that he would not have to do what God commands?”

“‘Knowing’ is too strong. ‘Trusting’ is better.”

“But he almost killed Isaac!”

“Almost.”

“That’s good. Isaac wasn’t killed. Thank goodness the story has nothing to do with you and me. It’s about a great man, a father we should admire but not imitate.”

“That’s right, we should not imitate Abraham in this respect. The Old Testament specifically forbids child sacrifice. Still, the story has something to do with you and me.”

“Suppose,” I continued, “that God asked me, ‘Who is more important to you, Nathanael or I?’ What do you think I should say?”

“You should say ‘God!’”

“Why?”

“You told me that my name means ‘God has given,’ right?”

“Right.”

“Well, if it were not for the giver, there would be no gift.”

“Smart boy! To receive you as a gift from God rightly, I must love God more than you. In a sense, that’s what Abraham did. Are you jealous?”

“No. If it were not for God, you would not have me and I would not have you; we would not be playing soccer and skiing together, and you would not be teaching me to drive even though I am only 12, and you . . .”

My thought was interrupted by the sound of little feet running toward me. Oblivious to the grave conversation I was having in my mind with his older self, my little son buried his head in my lap and demanded, “Tickle!” I did, half regretting that I could not go on to tell his older self about the God who, far from requiring us to sacrifice our children, sacrificed himself in the person of his Son for our salvation. Then he’d probably ask me about divine child abuse. I’d tell him something about the mysteries of the Trinity. Another time.