

This Magic Called Real

People were bringing little children to him that he might touch them.

(Mark 10:13a)

*The Rabbit sighed. He thought it would be a long time before
this magic called Real happened to him.*

He longed to become Real, to know what it felt like . . .

(Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit: How Toys Become Real*, 1922)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, **September 3, 2017**

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Mark tells of parents bringing their children to Jesus so that he might, touching them, offer a blessing. It's a beloved story, but likely would not have been a moment in Jesus' ministry we would long remember had not Mark described the tension created between Jesus and his disciples. To be sure, their motives had been admirable, wishing to guard their teacher's time and energy so as not to be worn down with what they imagined unimportant. Nonetheless, despite their good intentions, Jesus was indignant and upbraided them.

One can easily imagine their thinking as they attempt to stiff-arm the moment by offering their logic to the parents. *"Look, we live in the Real world, our ministry filled with very adult responsibilities and challenges, many urgent. Let your children – as delightful as they are – play their games and pretend in their childhood fantasies. But we're too busy to engage a mere child's fantasy world. Please, you see how the crowds are pressing, making our Lord's time more and more precious. We're sure you understand."* That's how I imagine it, though Mark only writes that the disciples *"speak sternly"* to the parents.

This displeases Jesus very much, who says, *"Let the little children come to me. Do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."* It's a teaching moment for Jesus, his reply indicating that those very adult responsibilities and challenges we imagine to be real and of utmost concern may, in fact, be illusion, and that what we imagine illusion may constitute Realness in the economy of the Kingdom of God.

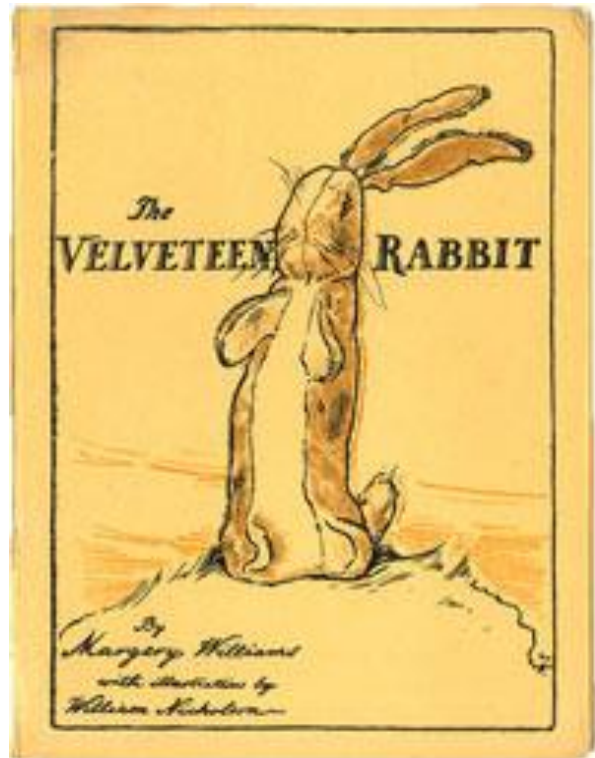
The Velveteen Rabbit or *How Toys Become Real* is a children's novel written in 1922 by Margery Williams. Re-published many times, it's been adapted into various film presentations, most recently a release by Michael Landon, Jr. in 2009. (If you own the first, 1922 edition, it could be today worth about \$15,000.) The book opens, *"There was once a velveteen rabbit, and in the beginning he was really splendid. He was fat and bunchy, as a rabbit should be."*

This rabbit, though, was only made of velveteen, not one of the more popular mechanical toys which, even in 1922 are described as *"superior, full of modern ideas, and pretended they were*

Real.” The more expensive mechanical toys looked down on the velveteen rabbit, snubbing him as if to say, “*Move to the side. You’re not a part of the “Real” world updated and equipped with 1922 technology. We are Real, more complex, and very lifelike.*”

“*Between them all,*” we read, “*the poor little Rabbit was made to feel himself very insignificant and commonplace.*”

I think the most insightful passage in *The Velveteen Rabbit* is a conversation between the rabbit and Skin Horse about becoming Real. The Skin Horse had lived longer in the nursery than any other toy, so old in fact that “*his brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath.*” (I wonder how many among us imagine themselves coming apart at the seams?) He was wise, though, having seen a long succession of the shiny, mechanical toys arrive with boast and swagger, but, he said (in the 2009 film version the voice is that of Tom Skerritt) “*by-and-by their mainsprings break.*” The Skin Horse knew that these more modern toys, with all the day’s technology, were, in fact, only toys, and would never turn into anything else.



“*What is real?*” asked the Rabbit. “*Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?*”

“*Real isn’t how you are made,*” said the Skin Horse. “*It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you Become Real.*”

“*Does it hurt?*” asked the Rabbit.

“*Sometimes,*” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “*When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.*”

“*Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,*” he asked, “*or bit by bit?*”

“*It doesn’t happen all at once,*” said the Skin Horse. “*You Become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily . . . Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.*”

“*The Rabbit sighed. He thought it would be a long time before this magic called Real happened to him. He longed to become Real, to know what it felt like; and yet the idea of growing shabby*

and losing his eyes and whiskers was rather sad. He wished he could become (Real) without these uncomfortable things happening to him.”

The Velveteen Rabbit’s lesson is that love, as untidy as it may be, is what makes us Real. This love isn’t merely the thrill with the new and shiny and perfect, but is developed through shared experience, through the wear and tear of relationship, however messy. Such love achieves intimacy in suffering together, even as our hair is being loved off and our joints become loose and we grow shabby.

A friend of mine with whom I began ministry in college some forty years ago while we were in our young 20s recently lost his wife after a long battle with cancer. We had been young newlyweds together and Sherry and I held Hal and Judy as close friends through our early ministry, our two girls and their two boys born about the same time – we seemed on a parallel path, often sharing youthful dreams and visions of ministry. Hal, in the last few months of Judy’s life wrote a daily blog about his caregiving experience for Judy. In one blog toward the end he wrote that *“the Unreal was stripped away, the essence of love exposed.”* As I read his words it seemed to me that he and Judy had experienced *This Magic Called Real*.

By the way, allow me to shift the paradigm to speak now, not of marriage, but of the pastoral relationship. The new and shiny can only become Real in ministry through the shared experience of a congregation’s journey – both in its suffering moments and in its joyful moments. It’s a rather common saying among the clergy that one becomes truly a pastor to a congregation only after about three funerals. I would add through the entire cycle of a church year, taking time to know and appreciate the unique traditions of the faith family. In other words, and I speak this as a new pastor (though I can’t say how shiny, except perhaps in my balding spots), *This Magic Called Real*, as it pertains to pastoral ministry, simply takes time and touch.

The late Jacob Bronowski chronicled the cultural evolution of humanity in a documentary called *“The Ascent of Man.”* He told how in medieval times the doctor did not touch the patient. However expert in anatomy, the task of cutting was seen as beneath him and was done by another, usually the town barber who knew how to brandish a razor with precision. The art of medicine, Bronowski notes, did not get off the ground until physicians took the daring move of actually touching the patient, the equivalent in medical history of seeing patients as Real.

A favorite story of mine is that of a 16th century homeless beggar taken desperately ill. Perhaps due to his low status, doctors gave up hope quickly. Seeing a chance for surgical experimentation one of the doctors said -- in Latin, so that the uneducated beggar would not understand -- *“Hagiamus experimentum in anima vile.”* Translation? *“Let us experiment on this vile fellow.”* This one, you see, did not rise to the level of Real for the doctors.

The beggar, actually an impoverished student who later would become a world renowned scholar, startled the physicians when he replied from the slab, in Latin, *“Animam vilem appellas pro qua Christus non designatus mori?”* Meaning, *“Will you call vile one for whom Christ did not disdain to die?”* We may as well render the Latin, *“Will you call Unreal that which Christ, through his suffering love, has declared Real?”*

On this Communion Sunday we celebrate Jesus' redemptive death, his brokenness embraced for our salvation. At this table, *This Magic Called Real*, we are invited to experience the Real Presence of Christ in these sacramental elements. Moreover here, at this table, we are invited to know ourselves as Real in the eyes of God, the beloved children of God.

*Hear the good news!
Christ died for us while we were yet sinners;
that proves God's love toward us.
In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!
Glory to God. Amen.*

