**WHEN I LEARNED I WAS REAL**

***Jesus and The Velveteen Rabbit***

William J. Bennett published a book back in 1993 that became one of my go-to books for personal reading, but also for telling stories to my children. I strongly encourage all parents to purchase a copy and have it next to your child’s bed or laid out for public display to be read at your leisure. *The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories* is its title. If you have never read it you are cheating yourself of valuable life lessons that all of us need to learn.

Bennet’s book is a collection of classic stories that have moral virtues that everyone, young and old, should take to heart. I’ll tell you, there is simply nothing more pleasing to me than a good old-fashioned story that is told with great skill that keeps my intellect on high alert and my curiosity with an “on-the-edge-of-your-seat” anticipation. He has collected engaging stories on topics such as Responsibility, Self-Discipline, Compassion, Friendship, Work, Courage, Perseverance, Honesty, Loyalty and Faith. Most of us recognize these traits as essentials to good character, but for our children, and us, to build these into our lives we have to offer them examples of right and wrong, and the best place to find them are in great works of literature, especially the Bible.

One such story that has been a favorite of mine is Margery William’s 1922 classic *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Long before the movie *Toy Story* came to the screen in which toys came to life when the child was sleeping or out of the room, Ms. Williams delightful world in which a child’s playroom turned into talking toys captured the hearts of millions of kids (and their parents). But far better than *Toy Story*, in which Woody, Buzz Lightyear, Jessie, Mr. Potato Head, Hamm, Rex and Slinky do rescue missions to prove their friendship to each other and to Andy, the story of a stuffed rabbit made out of velveteen taught children (and adults) the meaning of what is “Real.” I love it.

Spoiler Alert! The purpose of the story is to answer the question, “What is real, true and beautiful?” An out-of-date raggedy old rabbit is being replaced by modern mechanical toys that have moving parts and make sounds (remember, this is 1922). The new fangled toys discriminate against the ugly stuffed rabbit that is frayed and has missing body parts. This makes the rabbit feel useless and unloved. But a toy called Skin Horse is a wise old toy that has been around since the child’s grandfather was alive and so mentor’s the rabbit to help him understand what is real, and beautiful. I love this line from the book in which the Skin Horse is explaining life to Velveteen Rabbit:

"Real isn't how you are made . . . 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. It takes a long time. 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.”

One day the little boy couldn’t find his new-fangled toy to go to sleep at night so the nanny grabs the first thing she can find, which happens to be Velveteen Rabbit, and he cuddles up to it and falls to sleep. From that day forward Rabbit becomes the constant companion to Boy. As time moves on Rabbit undergoes the very changes Skin Horse told him would happen, losing his hair, an eye, getting loose joints and becoming shabby. When others tell Boy to replace that old rabbit, he tells everyone Rabbit is “Real!” That becomes the day Rabbit will never forget, for now he is real forever!

One day Boy comes down with Scarlet Fever and nearly dies. Rabbit never leaves his side, giving him comfort. But the doctor said all stuffed animals must be burned because they harbor invisible germs that promote the fever. Just before Rabbit is burned he sheds a real tear, which makes the Nursery Magic Fairy appear. She rescues him, taking him to the land of rescued toys that have become real. One day, as a real Rabbit, he hops in the woods and is seen by the Boy who had loved him. Boy cries out, “That rabbit looks just like my old Bunny that was lost when I had Fever, and he saved my life.” Rabbit finally realized his real purpose that Skin Horse had revealed to him:

“When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become real. It takes a long time.”

Why did I tell you this story? Jesus loves me, this I know!

Skin Horse said, “Once you are Real you can’t become unreal again, it lasts for always.”

God’s love is unconditional and eternal. We are loved “for always.” That is REAL.

“One night, and for many nights after, Rabbit was chosen to sleep with the Boy. Rabbit was so happy that he never noticed his beautiful velveteen fur getting shabbier, his tail coming unsewn, and all the pink rubbed off his nose where Boy had kissed him.”

God looks at all my defects and chooses to love me anyway. He sees my inner beauty the world scorns and says, “You are my precious child.” I feel so loved, warts and all.

“Over time the Rabbit grew older and despite how worn he became the Boy loved him even more. The boy loved him so much that his whiskers fell off and the pink lining to his ears turned grey. The Rabbit even began to lose his shape, and he scarcely looked like a rabbit anymore, except to the Boy. To the Boy he was always beautiful, because when you are Real, shabbiness doesn’t matter.”

Have you ever cared about someone so much that it didn’t matter if they were overweight, couldn’t see, or looked quite different then when you first met? God’s love has the power to renew us no matter how much we’ve changed: “*Though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed daily*” (2 Cor. 4:16).

Just as he was about to be burned Rabbit says,“Of what use was it to be loved and lose one’s beauty and become Real if it all ended like this? And a tear, a real tear, trickled down his little shabby velvet nose and fell to the ground.”

Death exemplifies the finality of mortality. We can’t change it or prevent it. However, for Christians, it is not the end, but the beginning. Life is not meaningless because of Christ. Scripture reminds us that, “*Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength*.” (I Cor. 15:40-49).

“Wasn’t I Real before?” asked the little Rabbit. “You were Real to the Boy,” the Fairy said, “because he loved you. Now you shall be Real to everyone.” The Rabbit’s toy body was transformed to a real rabbit’s body. His whiskers grew to touch the grass and his tail moved and his fur was lustrous. He hopped and played in the grass and joined the other rabbits in the wood.

Which reminds me of this great text from John*: “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is”* (I Jn. 3:2).

Like that Velveteen Rabbit I sometimes feel old-fashioned, ugly and worthless. But then I remember, “I am Real to God, and loved by Him.” That is all that matters. Except… I am also loved by you, and that matters too. Thank you for loving me, warts and all.

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