

The Velveteen Rabbit

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Kano Osanobu, Rabbits Frolicking in the Waves

There's an unwritten rule that every minister is required to preach one sermon on *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the 1921 children's story by Margery Williams, about a little stuffed bunny's journey to become Real through the love of the little boy who owns him. I love the way the best children's books explore these really deep theological themes. I still remember the first time my mom read this book to me when I was little and how it made me feel. And there's a message here in *The Velveteen Rabbit* for Emilia and Griffin and Reeve and their parents and godparents and all of us as we promise to raise and teach and form and love them well. And there's a message here about what it means to be in a relationship with God. Probably you've read *The Velveteen Rabbit* or had it read to you at least once, but if not, here's what you need to know:

A little boy gets a stuffed bunny for Christmas, but it's not as cool and exciting as some of the other windup toys he gets, so the bunny gets ignored in the nursey where he has plenty of time to talk to the other toys. He learns from an old toy horse all about what it means to Real. If a child truly loves a toy, then that toy becomes Real. Does it hurt? the bunny wants to know. Sometimes, but when you're Real you don't mind being hurt. Does it happen all at once or bit by bit? It doesn't happen all at once. You

become. It takes a long time. You'll be a very worn out, shabby toy by the time you become Real, but you won't mind because Real things can never be ugly except to people who don't understand.

Eventually, the bunny becomes the boy's favorite toy, and they have wonderful times playing together. One night, the nanny refers to the bunny as "just a toy" and the boy is very upset. You mustn't say that. He isn't a toy. He's REAL! And when he hears that, the bunny knows that it's true, the nurse magic has worked on him, and he's become Real. That night "so much love stirred in the rabbit's little sawdust heart that it almost burst." One day, playing outside, the little stuffed bunny meets some wild rabbits who are disturbed by his appearance. They ask him to play with them, but the bunny doesn't have any hind legs for jumping and so the wild rabbits tell him that he isn't Real like them which is very upsetting for him.

When the boy gets Scarlet Fever, the bunny stays with him in bed. When he finally recovers, the doctor orders everything that was in bed with the boy while he was sick to be burned—especially that old, ratty bunny. Sitting on the burn pile at the end of the garden the bunny becomes very sad and sheds a real tear which lands on the ground. A fairy flower grows from the tear and the nurse magic Fairy comes out of its blossom. She tells the bunny that she's going to turn him Real now. Wasn't I Real before? he asks. You were to the boy, but now you will be to everyone. She turns the bunny into a wild rabbit in the garden living with the other wild rabbits he met before. And he has real hind legs now that he can jump and twirl with. And in the spring when the boy comes out into the garden to play, he sees the rabbit and thinks it looks a lot like the old bunny he lost when he had Scarlet Fever, never realizing it was "his own Bunny, come back to look at the child who had first helped him to be Real." The End.

When I became a parent, I was pretty shocked to be handed the pink, wriggly ball that was my first son. Of course, there was joy. And for me, also, an immediate and heady experience of falling in love with this kid. At the same time, I also felt stirring in me this primal, animal, balled-fists instinct to protect my child. And my brain, addled by that night's emotions and hormones and lack of sleep began to worry away at the problem of every threat and danger that I would need to save my son from through the long course of his life. I could feel the momentous responsibility of keeping him safe and protecting him from all the pain and grief and injury that can happen in life.

At the same time, deep in my heart I was realizing—as my brain's list of potential threats and heartbreaks got longer and longer and longer—that although I'm going to do everything I can do to keep my son safe, I'm not going to be able to rewire the universe. He's going to get sick. He's going to feel sad. I'm going to disappoint him and maybe even occasionally fail him. Simply put, I couldn't protect him from his life. And I realized falling in love with him that night that the best protection I could offer him wasn't a shield from life's slings and arrows. The best protection I could offer him was to love him so thoroughly and so completely that when pain, and disappointment, and injury, and frustration, and heartache, and disease, and old age inevitably got to him that he would have the strength and the perspective to deal with their consequences.

One of the jobs we have as parents and godparents and grandparents and teachers is to help our children recognize that the price of life is totally worth paying. We can't teach them that by protecting them from life. We teach them that by loving them through life. *The Velveteen Rabbit's* perspective is that you only become Real after you're worn out and broken. But hopefully you've had the experience and the perspective to realize that your fur is rubbed off, and your seams are busted, and your paint is chipped not because life is some heartless meatgrinder, but because you were so thoroughly loved by and loving to the people around you. My prayer this morning for Emilia, Griffin, and Reeve, and all our kids is that we offer them as much of this kind of unselfconscious, joyful, playful love as we can—that we believe in them. And if we love them and believe in them, they're going to grow up, and one day leave the nursery, and discover that they can walk on their own two feet. And may they be filled with the power to love their lives and every joy and challenge that life brings their way.

And, of course, we want our children to have a relationship with God too, right? And so let's teach them that the gift of God is waiting for them. It's waiting to be noticed among all the other busy, shiny, exciting toys in the nursery. The gift of God is already in every life waiting to be picked up, to be noticed, to be loved. And once we pick God up, every snuggle, every game, every secret whispered in God's ear brings God closer into our lives and closer to the world through us. Just like the boy's love breathed life into the bunny, our love and attention breathe reality into the Divine. God, like the bunny, doesn't usually become Real in an instant but evolves with each act of love, each night under the covers, every afternoon playing in the garden—God grows with us.

God loved humanity into existence in the book of Genesis. And now we here today love God into existence through our lives. And when we love God into existence in our lives, God becomes an undeniable presence, guiding us, giving us strength and perspective. The Bible tells us "God is love." So, when we fill our kids with the love to appreciate and thrive in the face of life's challenges, we are filling them with God. God is that love-filled perspective—the widest and deepest dimension of human existence. And when we bring that Divine dimension to life inside of us, because it is far bigger than us, it eventually escapes us, escapes the nurse, overflows and breaks free into the wide and wild world.

The moral of the story, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, is that things are Real not because they move or are busy, but because somebody has loved them into reality. A sign that something is Real is that it's been worn down by that love. I have no doubt that Emilia, and Griffin, and Reeve will know that kind of love. And I pray that as that love grows up in them that it also overflows into the friends, and family, and work, and community, and world all around them. Amen.