

Lessons on parenting from a Children's book

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One of the joys of being a parent is reading some wonderful children's books again, this time from a new place in life. One can enjoy some delightful tales without the burden of thinking that one's time would be better spent on more serious issues. After all, parents are supposed to read to their children.

One such story is *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams, subtitled: *How Toys Become Real*. The book relates the story of how a little boy comes to enjoy, play with and share the magic of his imagination with a toy rabbit.

A particularly good section of this book (44 large-print pages in all) is devoted to the wisdom of the Shin Horse discoursing with the Velveteen Rabbit on the qualities of being real. After the little boy's serious bout with scarlet fever, all of his toys must be disinfected and/or burned. Just before the terrible match is to consume the velveteen rabbit, however, the nursery fairy godmother kisses the tattered worn, grieving rabbit, and with that sign of total love, she turns the rabbit into a living animal.

The protagonist of this little tale is the rabbit; the fable is about life and death and love – the stuff of all good fables. No name is given to the little boy; he is every child. No name is given to the rabbit – he is what everyone can become, with effort.

We need tales and fables because the search for what is real between people starts early in life. That the Velveteen Rabbit has such appeal in the English-speaking world is a tribute to the charming and profound way it touches upon this central issue of life. The words of the text speak with both simplicity and profundity: asked how one becomes real, the Shin Horse replies: *It doesn't happen all at once*, and then he adds, *That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. 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 *Velveteen Rabbit* goes a long way, I believe, in describing one of the most important experiences of life, namely, that in overcoming one's narcissistic tendency by genuinely caring for another, we discover that we have passed – just like the rabbit – from death to life.

Many centuries ago, St Augustine said that the hand that rocked the cradle ruled the world. Freud elaborates on this thought when he speaks of parenting as one of the most difficult of human tasks.

This little tale of the velveteen rabbit is a metaphor for parenting and for the type of love required for parenting to be a human achievement, rather than just a biological event. Parenting entails the sober recognition and experience that in caring for the oncoming generation, the goal is not the personal aggrandizement of the parent nor the objective accomplishments and/or appearance of one's offspring. The goal is simply that

our children know they have good insides; then they can feel real because they are loved for themselves. Of course, this is what enables a person to love in his or her own right.

Parents become parents by finding this capacity to give love to another and not in keeping track of the giving. A parent comes alive in such intercourse; a child comes alive with such experiences. The goal is clear, although the practice may be difficult.

We are inundated today with hundreds of books telling us how to live life (how to love, or how not to love' how to be a financial success or how to survive not being a financial success, etc.) Their publication is certainly good for the publishers; one hopes they are helpful to readers.

The joys and tragedies of life are, however, more complex than human language encompasses. May I suggest, nevertheless, that you read *The Velveteen Rabbit* when the tasks of parenting become, as Freud reminds us, very difficult.