

## **A Time to Become Real**

In 1922 Marjorie Williams published a children's book entitled *The Velveteen Rabbit*. One Christmas, a young boy receives a stuffed velveteen rabbit. When the Rabbit enters the nursery, some other toys flaunt their superiority over him. They say, "We are the real toys because we have gears and switches and whistles. You are just a stuffed rabbit. You're not a real toy." This, of course, discouraged the Rabbit, so he sought the wisdom of the Skin Horse, who had been in the nursery for a very long time. He asked the Skin Horse, "What does it mean to be REAL?"

"Real isn't how you're 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." "Does it hurt?" Asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes said the Skin Horse," for he was always truthful. "When you are Real, however, you don't mind being hurt."

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, your eyes drop out, and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. These things don't matter at all because once you are Real, you can never be ugly except to the people who don't understand."

There are four aspects to this beautiful image relevant for us today. First, the purpose of life is to become Real, understand what is essential, grow in wisdom, and live in the love of God and the love of others. Second, this process doesn't happen all at once; it happens bit by bit, year by year. Third, becoming Real sometimes hurts; it involves pain, rejection, and sometimes failure. Growing is not easy. And four, once you become Real, nothing else matters because you have become what you are meant to be.

Now the season of Lent, which we begin, is another opportunity to become Real, to center on what is most important, to claim again the truth that we are called to live in the love of God and the love of others. It's a lifelong process. It doesn't happen all at once; it happens year by year, Lent by Lent, grace by grace. But this Lent, these forty days are another chance to take a step forward. This Lent is another chance to put those things which have failed us aside and no longer let them rule our lives. This Lent gives us another opportunity to take a step to make that healing happen. Lent is another time to put relationships first, make sure that other things do not detract from them, and give ourselves to what is most important because we become real through the love of God and others.

Is this easy? Not at all. Every time we try to love, we take the risk of being hurt, of being rejected, of making a wrong decision, or even of failure. We see Jesus in today's gospel struggling with the devil. He does this because life is a struggle, and growing is never easy. Even though Jesus is perfect, he still struggles because being human means not growing without a fight. But if you give yourself to the battle, if you work honestly, it will lead to growth, and we can become whom we are called to be in time.

So this Lent is a time to become Real, to put away the things that hurt us, heal the broken relationships, and center ourselves more clearly on the love of God and neighbor. It's a struggle. In time our hair will be loved off, our eyes will be dim, our joints will be loose, and we'll look overall rather shabby. But none of that will be important because when we live in the love of God and neighbor, we will be Real. And to be Real, you can never be ugly—except to the people who don't understand.

*Fr. George Smiga presently serves on the scripture and homiletic faculty of St. Mary Seminary and Graduate School of Theology in Wickliffe Hills, Ohio.*