

Becoming Real

I was six years old when I discovered that I was real. I remember the waves of comprehension crashing through my second-grade consciousness, the words racing through my mind over and over: *I'm real*. I ran into the kitchen where my mom was cooking dinner and told her the news. Not surprisingly, she affirmed my eureka moment with a mildly concerned smile and a raised eyebrow: "Yes, Abbie, you're real." What she didn't understand was that my six-year-old universe was undergoing a vast reconfiguration; shooting stars and spinning comets were coming into pristine focus, and for the first time, I was vividly aware of my own existence.

I had just finished *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams, the beautiful tale of the stuffed Rabbit who becomes Real. Early in the story, the Rabbit wonders what being Real means. The Skin Horse, long ago loved to reality by the Boy's uncle, responds. "Real isn't how you are made," he says. "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." Sometimes it hurts, the Skin Horse tells the Rabbit, but when you're real, you don't mind the pain. Oh, and one more thing: "It doesn't happen all at once," he shares. "You become. It takes a long time."

But I'm already Real, I thought to myself as I looked at the pictures of the Rabbit, the Skin Horse, and the beautiful fairy springing forth from the Rabbit's tears. *God made me Real. How can it take a long time?* I decided that becoming Real was something that only happened to toys, and that the Skin Horse was mistaken. I was a human being, not a toy, so Real was how I was made.

It wasn't until college that I realized I was wrong.

During my first semester of college, I encountered the idea of being and becoming in my Western Civilization class. The assigned readings seemed to return to this idea: Plato, always the narrative philosopher, told stories about a mysterious cave, a land of shadows and reflections of the Real. Before him, Heraclitus famously declared that you cannot step into the same river twice; the only constancy is change and becoming. St. Augustine wrote of his desire for full communion with God: “You have formed us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You.” Becoming fully human, becoming sanctified, becoming Real: it soon dawned on me that at the heart of it, these are the same. The Rabbit, the cave, and the river are all storied images of being and becoming.

You become. It takes a long time.

According to German philosopher Josef Pieper, we are not yet what we already are. This is the mystery and the paradox of the human condition: we are miraculous creatures, at once beloved of God and mired in sin. We simultaneously radiate and obscure glory. We are both mortal and immortal, capable of both heroism and indignity.

My six-year-old intuition was correct, but only partially so: we are Real, and existence itself is an utter miracle, yet at the same time, we are not yet what we already are. But as the Rabbit learns at the close of the story, there is an end to the long road of becoming, and that end is the fullness of being. And so we live out our days in the tension of the already and the not-yet. We live in bright-eyed anticipation of the world to come. Finally, we cling to the promise that in a trumpet crash and the twinkling of an eye, we will finally be what we already are: the enfleshed and glorified Image, beloved of the Creator God, Real forevermore.