

# The Price of ‘Real’

by Judy Howell, President MFCA

*“I’ve brought you a new playfellow,” the fairy said. “You must be very kind to him and teach him all that he needs to know in Rabbitland, for he is going to live with you...”*

*And she kissed the little Rabbit again and put him down on the grass.*

*“Run and play, little Rabbit!” she said.*

The endearing classic tale of *The Velveteen Rabbit How Toys Become Real* by Margery Williams tells the tale of a beloved plush rabbit that belongs to a young boy and a beloved old rolling horse who teaches the little rabbit about “What Real Really Means.”

Our family is a ‘real’ family, though none of us share genetics or blood lines. Children in our family come from far and wide and to each of the children who come under my care I try hard to become a ‘real’ mom. I am sometimes shouted at “You not my ‘real’ mom” and I listen and I smile, for I know what it takes to be a ‘real’ mom and I know that ‘real’ moms can stand against the anger and hurt and pain that comes with foster and adoptive care. I know what it feels like to take care of ‘real’ kids – children who hurt and hate and cry. Children who love and play and smile.

I love the laughter of a child. I love the funny things they say and do. I cherish the moments of quietness as they sleep. I grieve with them as I hold them as they cry tears of loneliness, hurt, grief and loss. My own tears flow too.

I love watching them grow and learn and challenge the world from which they have come – as they become real. I hope to encourage them to know themselves better, giving them permission to become ‘real’ boys and girls – eventually giving them the ability to become a ‘real’ adult and a ‘real’ mom or dad to other children in their ‘real’ family.

*“What is real?” asked the Rabbit one day . . . “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick out handle?”*

*“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “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.”*

Being a ‘real’ family means that no matter what happens in life you do what it takes to take care of each other. You stop doing what you want to do and do what you need to do in order for your family members to stay safe – even if it takes hard work and hurts. As the leaders of the family, you make sure that you put into each younger family member abilities to ensure a better future for that special person.

*“Does it hurt?” asks the Rabbit.*

*“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”*

A ‘real’ family is willing to change bad habits or correct things that need correcting in order to remain healthy. A ‘real’ family understands that change is a beautiful part of life and that nothing can ever remain the same. A ‘real’ family embraces a new member and applauds the success of a member leaving for an independent future. A ‘real’ family is there in the good times and in the bad times.

‘Real’ moms and dads love their kids and give their kids’ needs a high priority. A ‘real’ mom or dad is willing to give up things so that those cared for can have a happy life. It has nothing to do with genetics – it has to do with time and love – care and compassion. A ‘real’ mom or dad is not afraid of discipline – self discipline or helping to teach self-discipline. They may yell or give that look – but they show their love by being there and caring even when their heart is breaking. They understand the difference between needs and wants and are willing to take a hard stand if necessary.

*“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked “or bit by bit?”*

*“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be kept carefully. 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 joint and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once*

*you are Real you can't be ugly,  
except to the people who don't  
understand."*

Over 300 different children have passed through the doors of my home, slept in my bedrooms and eaten at my table. There was nothing 'unreal' about these children. Each came to my home under different circumstances. I would expect nothing less of myself than to be a 'real' mother and provide a 'real family' for the children under my care.

In this time of rethinking large institutional care of children I am saddened and apprehensive. Every child needs to have one human being, preferably two, who thinks that this one child – and siblings – are the most special, fabulous, amazing, wonderful people on earth. Birth parents do that. Relatives do that. Adoptive parents do that and many foster parents do that. Children

can tell the difference between family-like and family.

Can a career caregiver who gets a 'real' paycheck provide the love and care our foster and adoptive homes do? Foster care covers expenses and adoption subsidy barely offsets expenses of care. Can such an orphanage provide a place to 'come home to' for holidays or crisis? Minnesota institutional employee turnover is high. When a career caregiver goes on to a new career and leaves working in institutional care – does that mean the family is no longer? Or is this family-like acceptable. 'real' children thrive on relationships and commitment regardless if they have trouble making them.

Today I am a 'real' grandmother – to 'real' birth grandchildren and 'real' foster grandchildren – a 'real' birthmother to two 'real' children, a 'real' foster mother to over 300 children and an 'real' adoptive mother to four teens. These 'real' children return home, write and call – sometimes

they stop in for a visit. Many are grown.

Each of my 'real' children has a different life story of which I was allowed to play a part – hopefully letting each of them become a little more 'real' because of my contribution to their lives. Thank you for being part of MFCA. Tell your friends and family we need more adoptive and foster homes for 'real' children. We need more respite homes for 'real' families.

*God Bless*

*Judy Howell*

*President MFCA*

*PS. . . I take calls and listen to 'real'  
caregivers. (651) 770-1247*



*Judy Howell is the President of  
Minnesota Foster Care  
Association, she is an adoptive,  
foster and birth mother.*

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We need more foster and adoptive parents as members. Get your friends to join MFCA and keep up the great job Minnesota!

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