

Becoming More

By Michael Monroe

It's likely every adoptive parent has encountered the dreaded "real parent" comment. For some, the comment came from a well-meaning stranger curiously inquiring about a child's history by asking about his or her "real parents." For others, it came from a not so well-meaning inquiry about why a child's "real parents" had to "give her up." No matter the situation, all adoptive parents have heard these types of comments. And while they can be more than a bit annoying at times, they point to a difficult and sometimes even painful reality.

No one can deny that my children are mine and I am theirs. We are every bit a "real" family. I am their "real" dad, my wife is their "real" mom, they are my "real" kids and they are all "real" brothers and sisters. Believe me, we have the ups and downs, highs and lows to prove it. Whether we fit someone else's definition of "real" is not really my concern.

While all of this is true, however, it does not negate that my children are not "all mine." I cannot lay exclusive claim to them. Each of them came to me with history — some of it known, much more of it unknown. They have a past that pre-dates me. And although I am not a part of that past, I do have the opportunity to embrace it and help them do the same.

I recently read a quote by Betty Jean Lifton, and it made me stop and think. She wrote, "For me, a real mother is one who recognizes and respects the whole identity of her child and does not ask him to deny any part of himself." This is no less true for "real" fathers as well.

As I think about all of this, I have come to the reality that my children are on a journey. It is a lifelong journey and one that involves all of them; it is a physical, emotional, relational

and spiritual journey. It is a journey to discover who they are and whose they are, and there are no shortcuts — at least none worth taking. It is a journey they must travel; I cannot travel it for them. Neither can I plan every twist and turn or determine where it will ultimately lead.

But I can choose to travel this journey with them, often following their lead and compassionately guiding them when needed. Along the way they may lead me through rocky places of confusion, valleys of grief and loss and even into dark places of pain. But if, by God's grace, I will embrace their journey as my own, I will experience one of life's greatest blessings — the deep and lasting connection that comes from making each step of their journey an inextricable part of my own, and their destination our shared fate.

I cannot ignore that there are many things that can keep me from joining my children on their journeys — my fears; my own pain and loss; my lack of confidence in knowing what to say, when to say it and how; and the sometimes subtle sense that I am in competition with my children's pasts. All of these things and more seem to whisper to me to run the other way.

But I've come to believe that would require me to deny part of who they are and thus part of who we are as a family. I cannot do that if I am "real" and want to become even more so.

The difficult reality is that but for the difficult realities of my children's past we would not be the family we are. I love who we are and who they are. I love all of each of them. So instead of running from these things, I want to choose to run toward them, hand in hand with my kids. By doing so I believe I have the opportunity to become even more "real" to them, and to make more real the redemptive



story that God is writing with our lives.

As I think about "becoming more real" to my kids I am reminded of the exchange captured by Margery Williams in her children's classic, "The Velveteen Rabbit." The Rabbit wants to become a "real" rabbit and early in the story

Real to My Kids



AUTHOR MICHAEL MONROE has become committed to becoming more “real” to his children, from left, 7-year-old Grant, 5-year-old Kate, 9-year-old Miles and 5-year-old Carter, with the help of his wife, Amy.

it encounters the Skin Horse, a well-worn and wise veteran toy in the nursery. Skin Horse offers the following insight to Rabbit — and to us — about what it means to become “real.”

“What is real?” asked the Rabbit one day,

when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “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.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was



Looking for some helpful books and resources related to this topic? Check these out:

- Not Your Everyday Conversation: Talking About the Difficult Realities of Adoption and Foster Care with Your Children by Michael & Amy Monroe (presented at the 2009 Tapestry Adoption & Foster Care Conference) see <http://tapestryconference.org/resources>)
- Telling the Truth to Your Adopted or Foster Child by Betsy Keefer and Jayne Schooler
- Raising Adopted Children by Lois Ruskai Melina
- Twenty Things Adopted Kids Wish Their Adoptive Parents Knew by Sherrie Eldridge
- Beneath the Mask: Understanding Adopted Teens by Debbie Riley
- Talking with Young Children About Adoption by Mary Watkins and Susan Fisher
- Real Parents, Real Children by Holly van Gulden and Lisa Bartels-Rabb

THE MONROE CHILDREN include from left, 7-year-old Grant, 5-year-old Kate, 9-year-old Miles and 5-year-old Carter.

always truthful. “When you are real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“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 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.”

“I suppose you are Real?” said the Rabbit. And then he wished he had not said it, for he thought the Skin Horse might be sensitive.

But the Skin Horse only smiled.

“The Boy’s Uncle made me Real,” he said. “That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can’t become unreal again. It lasts for always.”

I know that I am very “real” to my kids, but I also know that they need me to become even more “real” to them by joining them on their journey. It won’t always be easy nor will it happen quickly for us. But having become “real” I can never become unreal. It lasts for always, and that makes it all the more worth it.

Michael Monroe and his wife Amy lead Tapestry, a ministry for adoptive and foster families at Irving Bible Church in Irving, Texas. You can find out more information about Tapestry at www.tapestry.irvingbible.org.