

Tales from the Velveteen Rabbit, or How Academic Women Become Real

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1997 AWA Women of the Year

I want to thank you all for the honour of joining the incredible past winners of the AWard. I want to thank my nominator Nanci Langford. I also want to thank my family, my husband Tom, my daughter Kristin, who is here tonight, and my son Peter. Without their support, I couldn't have been the women of opportunity that I wanted to be. My contributions for women on this campus have been small in comparison to others', but I am always amazed that even those small things can be seeds that will bear fruit. I always knew that achieving equity would involve more than a report, a policy or a single event. Being able to spend over twenty-five years on this campus has given me a perspective to acknowledge just how many reports, policies, and events it really takes to plant the seeds for change. I have come to appreciate the importance of collective action over time if you really want to get things done. Seven years ago, the action and recommendations of the President's Commission for Equity and Respect planted the seeds for change, but it took the energy and efforts of many others to ensure that these seeds would bear fruit. Because of the work and the solid leadership and energy of Cathy Ann and Janet on Opening Doors in the Office of Human Rights, the leadership of Deans like Pat Clements, the initiatives taken by Associate Vice President Anne Marie Decore, the actions of this year's AWA executive to look at faculty equity plans, and through the initiative that many of you took hiding the scenes in your own faculties, the equity work on this campus continues and results are beginning to be felt. These results encourage me, and I hope you as well, to continue to value this organisation, and women's collaborative efforts to make sure that these issues make the university agenda for action.

The Academic Women's Association has provided a place to focus our actions, a centre for camaraderie amidst very demanding jobs and has modelled strong female leadership. Thanks to our past and present leaders, the Dorises, the Bentes, the Sandras, the Jeans, the Dallases, the Hedys, the Janes, the Margaret-Annes, the Pats, the Andreas, the Lindas -- and to all the women who work behind the scenes to make things happen for all of us.

Equity will continue to be an issue for women in university communities because the attitudes that feed the issue continue to be diverse and conflicting. If we seek to make this university indisputable recognised as one of the top universities in Canada, equity issues need to be part of the equation. As long as these issues remain unresolved, we will be mediocre and unable to recruit and retain the brightest and best of half of our population of faculty, staff and students.

I see our universities at a particularly important transition point as we attempt to replenish our ranks. While some call it a transition involving a major renewal of our faculty resources, others merely see it as passing through the expected development stages of work careers. However, it is conceptualised changes that are happening and will continue to happen as many of our colleagues take early or normal retirement will put a new act on the university and these changes have a significant potential impact on academic women. We must ask ourselves at this point; What does this transition mean for women in the academy, for equity issues in the academy, for leadership in the academy, and for this organisation.

So tonight, I would like to engage in a pit of looking at this transition and these questions using the themes of "Tales from the Velveteen Rabbit" in honour of the twenty-fifth anniversary of this wonderful award-winning children's book written by Margery Williams. Considering the characters within the book, the Velveteen Rabbit and the Skin Horse allows us to step outside our lives and look for insights that might help us face the renewal of our academic workforce and, indeed, the mission of this organisation.

The title of this little book was The Velvetten Rabbit or how toys become real. I will take liberties with the text and retitle these thoughts:

The Velveteen Rabbit

or How Academic Women Become Real

The story begins this way on a Christmas morning. The Boy in the story had just received a wonderful stuffed rabbit in his stocking.

There was once a velveteen rabbit and in the beginning [s]he was really splendid. [S]he was fat and bunched, as a rabbit should be; [her] coat was spotted brown and white, [s]he had real thread whiskers, and [her] ears were lined with pink sateen.

Who might that Velveteen Rabbit be at the University of Alberta? Any one of us when we first arrived: "fat and bunched...and lined with pink sateen". Unfortunately many of us may have looked that way on the outside but we also arrived worried about day-care, if we had children, insecure if we could only land a sessional job or a temporary position, frazzled if we were handling a schedule that meant juggling several different areas of life with no models to follow, concerned about our relationships with more established colleagues who weren't any more sure about women's place in the institution that we were, and unsure of what we could expect from this big impersonal place. We were a bit like the Velveteen Rabbit--happy to be here, basking in the success of getting the job, but soon finding out that there was more to the job and being accepted than just being hired. As the story continued, for at least two hours the Boy (the Department/University) loved the Velveteen Rabbit, but it didn't take much time for [her] to be relegated to the toy cupboard (or the less important areas) and snubbed for the more expensive toys (the more established colleagues).

For you see, the Velveteen Rabbit couldn't claim to be a model of anything, neither the traditional academic, the new women, or the sage scholar, for she didn't know that real rabbits (female academics) existed. She thought they were all made just like she was; stuffed with sawdust or overloaded with duties and insecurities. After all, who'd make a big deal of it "since sawdust was quite out of date and should never be mentioned in modern circles. The other toys (colleagues) some of whom should have had broader views put on airs and pretended they were connected with the government!" All this made the Velveteen Rabbit feel insignificant and ordinary.

But...along came the Skin Horse(her colleagues in AWA).

"The only person who was kind to [her] was the Skin Horse... [she] had lived longer in the nursery than any of the others. [She] was so old that [her] brown coat was bald in patches and showed the seams underneath, and most of the hairs in [her] tail had been pulled out to string bead necklaces (of fight equity battles, or organise a new day-care centre)... [S]he was wise, for [s]he has seen a long succession of mechanical toys (old boys) arrive to boast and swagger, and by and by break their mainsprings and pass away, and [s]he knew that they were only toys (ordinary humans) and would never turn into anything else."

The toy cupboard and its surrounding has some real similarities to the academic milieu. the real message of the story however emerges when the Velveteen Rabbit asks probing questions of the Skin Horse.

"What is REAL?... Does it mean having this that buzz inside you ad a stick-out handle?"

On this campus women have asked similar questions. Do we have to be better than everyone else? Do we have to continue to stand out from the crowd just to have our issues addressed? Do we have to fight for each and every thing we do, to expend energy just be rather than to do what we were hired to d?

It was here that the Skin Horse, the wise resident elder (one of our wise AWA elders and colleagues) was most philosophical.

"Real isn't how you were made (your gender)...it's a thing that happens to you."

Not having a GFC policy manual or department policy book, the Velveteen Rabbit asked, "How does it happened?"

The Skin Horse responded, "It happens when a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but really loves you, then you become real".

What does that mean for women on campus since we cannot expect that our campus will commit itself to spontaneous expressions of love and affection. I think it means that

becoming real on a campus when women are acknowledged for who they are and what they might contribute not on the basis of whether they are women.

Then the Rabbit inquired about the way that this becoming REAL happens, since [s]he is concerned about whether or not it will hurt, or if it will happen all at once or bit by bit.

The Skin Horse replied to the inquiring Rabbit. She suggested that you have to become -- and it takes a very long time. [S]he cautioned, "That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or have to be carefully kept. Generally by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, 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... Once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

In my teaching career, I have used this story to help people understand many complex relationships in families and other relationships. How does it help us understand the struggle women have had to become Real participants in the academic milieu, and how does it provide this organisation with some guidelines for continuing to enlist the kind of people who don't have people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who must be carefully kept? Few of the New Velveteen Rabbits who will join us as new colleagues will want to have their hair loved off, see their eyes drop out, or become shabby and loose in the joints, not do they want to be considered ugly members of the academic community because they are continuously battling for issues that have not captured the attention of anyone beyond themselves. To prevent these dire consequences-- what might we do to help them begin the process of becoming Real?

I want to mention but a few strategies that I believe need to be part of the ongoing agenda for the AWA as it moves beyond the transition of renewal.

As a group we need see that equity and human issues become a part of the excellence agenda for this university and for others like it. Getting equity and the quality of human relationships among all members of our constituent bodies on the agenda for renewal action is important. Renewal is more than recruitment and replacement. It involves looking again at our programs and policies and structures with new insight and direction. As we evaluate programs, as we establish our key outcome measures, as we do our recruitment of staff and faculty and students, we need to put this kind of renewal at the forefront. How does AWA do this? We need to be aware of the issues and to share our views in places where the future direction of this university are being charted. Let's get our nomination committees going again to be sure that our Skin Horses and our Velveteen Rabbits are on important committees, are asking probing questions, are being viewed as resources in helping the university achieve its objectives, are celebrating even small steps that indicate progress.

We also need to take steps to assure that the New Velveteen Rabbits who arrive to renew our ranks will not have to refight the old battles of day-care, pay equity, recruitment equity. Hopefully the current action to formalise a university day-care policy will soon

provide better options for women needing this service. We must continue to ask however what the impact has been on women in academy due to downsizing, early retirements, restructuring. Has the decrease in the number of female leaders limited women's access to bring issues to the table? Have the past years of giving so much attention to restructuring and financial stringency hid other issues because energy spent on one issue cannot be allocated to another?

We also need to strengthen our collegueship so that providing each other with mutual support will continue to be a priority. How will we get to know the newcomers? How will we welcome them, let them into the system, help them master the intricacies of the balancing acts that we all eventually master? Perhaps it is time to consider more formal connections between established and newcomers so we don't have to wait for seminars on negotiations or tenure to set newcomers on track.

We need to continue to demonstrate that investing in the leadership of an organisation like the AWA and giving to the community aspects of our life on campus, whether in our own departments or units or beyond, pays off in the long run. When times get tough it is easy for us to turn inward to accomplish our own objectives and to leave the community work to someone else. When this happens we all lose.

My way as an administrator and as a professor has been paved by many strong women before me. Because they took the time and made the efforts to work together on so many difficult and important issues --pay equity, sexual harassment, day-care, negotiations, representation on committees, creating a hospitable community- I didn't have to fight the battle alone. Because they were there, I could depend on supportive colleagues to help plot the next step in handling difficult issues, or share my frustration, and to celebrate the successes along the way. I have always believed that solving tough problems is best done by teamwork --this organisation has always been a good example of how that principle really works. What would any of us around these tables have done without the community efforts of the many women fulfilling the executive positions of this organisation, the female Deans and Chairs, Vice Presidents, directors and other leaders who provided such dynamic models, and the members themselves who have been so welcoming and encouraging when we most needed it.

Real isn't how you are made - it's a thing that happens to you. I believe it happens as we work together, chart the way, share the narratives, and celebrate the success. Tonight, I celebrate the work of the wonderful women who have contributed to this organisation. Some of them have indeed lost some hair (or at least had it turn grey), been battered a bit so that their joints loosened, and on bad days we might even admit that we looked a little shabby. But these things don't matter at all-- because once you are connected to this enterprise you can't really be ugly--except to the people who don't really attempt to understand.

Reference: William, Margery. (1971) *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.