**What Is Real?**

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According to a medieval legend, after Jesus' ascension, Martha, along with her siblings Mary and Lazarus, were cast adrift in a boat, miraculously landing in Provence, France. Martha became a successful itinerant preacher. In one village, the people complained of an dreadful dragon terrorizing the area by sinking ships and eating people. The villagers made a bargain with Martha~~if she could subdue the dragon, they would become Christians.

Undaunted, Martha found the beast in its lair, in the middle of devouring its lunch of a man. She held up her giant cross and soaked the dragon with holy water. This tamed the monster so much that it became docile as a lamb, albeit not as soft and fuzzy. She put a leash on the now gentle dragon and took it back to the village. While the villagers were surprised to see the now meek and mild creature, they were so filled with resentment and fear from its previous actions, they attacked and killed it—in spite of Martha’s pleas to leave the dragon be. She didn’t give up on the people, though, and preached to them about forgiveness. Filled with remorse, the people converted to Christianity and named their town after the dragon—Terasque.

But, we know dragons aren’t real, right?

Or, are they?

What is real, anyway?

If you look in the dictionary, “real" is defined as true, but with several nuances.

Real is true as in "existing or occurring as fact; actual rather than imaginary, ideal, or fictitious.” For instance, “the events you will see in this movie are real and not made up.”

Real is being actually, not just so-called~~like “ a “real victory.”

Real is genuine, not artificial or imitation or counterfeit, like “real silk or a real diamond.”

Real is that which is unfeigned, authentic or sincere, like “She is a real friend” or “they are expressing real sympathy.”

The movie, **Lars and the Real Girl** expands these nuances of the meaning of the word real. It suggests there is an elasticity to what we think is real, and what we think is unreal. Or surreal? Is surreal real? Again, what is real?

Lars Lindstrom, played by Ryan Gosling, is the central figure in the movie. Lars is socially awkward, and a loner. His mother died while giving birth to him. Lars and his older brother Gus grew up with a distant grief-stricken father, causing Gus to leave as soon as he was old enough. Upon their father’s death, the brothers inherited the family home. Lars lives in the converted garage, while Gus and his spouse,Karin, who is pregnant with their first child, live in the main house. Karin tries very hard to bring Lars out of his shell, but Lars finds interaction with anyone very difficult. A colleague at his office, Margo, also tries to engage him, but Lars is impervious to her attempts.

One evening, Lars announces to Gus and Karin has a visitor whom he met online, a [wheelchair](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wheelchair)-mobile Brazilian named Bianca. Gus and Karin are so excited to have them over to dinner, but are startled to discover that Bianca [is actually a lifelike doll](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prop_comedy), ordered from an adult sex-toy website, whom Lars treats as a live human being.

Concerned about his mental health, they convince Lars to take Bianca to see the [family doctor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_doctor), Dagmar Berman, who is also a [psychologist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychologist). Dr. Berman diagnoses Bianca with [low blood pressure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypotension) and urges Lars to return for "weekly treatments" for Bianca, while she spends time listening to Lars.

During this time, Margo has begun to date another co-worker, which silently bothers Lars.

Anyway, Lars introduces Bianca as his girlfriend to his co-workers and various townspeople. They all respond to Bianca as if she were “real” and begin to invite Bianca to social events and volunteer programs.

One morning, Gus and Karin are awakened by a panicked Lars, alarmed because Bianca is unresponsive, and she is rushed to the hospital. Lars tells Gus and Karin that Bianca is dying. Dr. Berman tells Gus and Karin that this is a decision that Lars had made alone about Bianca’s future.

Bianca does die, and her funeral is packed by all the peole who knew and loved her. It’s a beautiful service. At the graveside, Lars and Margo linger together, and Lars invites Margo to go for a walk with him. The movie ends with the suggestion that Margo and Lars will build a relationship with each other.

Was Bianca real?

To Lars she was. And throughout the movie she seems to become more real. People at church and at work respond to Biancaas if she were a breathing creature. They cared about Lars, he loved Bianca, and Bianca became real. So real that she is a conduit to bringing him closer into community, closer to connection and support. It’s beautiful to see it unfold.

When the movie began, I was worried for Lars. I worried that this would be a story of bullying and shaming someone that was different and so awkward that they were painfully hard to be around.

But frankly, even though people were flummoxed by how to respond to Lars, when Bianca came on the scene, they were able to be flexible in their sense of what was real, and they patiently and joyfully welcomed her. This welcoming acceptance built a bridge of trust and love that Lars could pass back and forth on without fear.

What is real? In one sense, of course dragons and life-size toy dolls are not real.

But, in actuality and authenticity they can be.

Back to Mary and Martha. According to that same French legend, while Martha was out taming dragons, Mary founded a monastery in a remote cave high up into a mountain. Like their roles in Luke’s gospel, Martha continued living out an active spiritual path while Mary continued being a contemplative.

In Luke, when Jesus is visiting the home of Mary and Martha for dinner, each had a different way of caring for their guest. Martha’s hospitality was embodied in her doing~~making sure dinner was provided. Mary, the mystic, sat down with to be present with Jesus. Both the being and doing was essential.

However, Martha had a dragon wreaking havoc on her, but it wasn’t that she was busy making dinner. Rather, her dragon was that she was “distracted”. The Greek word translated for “distracted” is peri-spao—peri meaning “about” or “because of” and spao which means “to draw” What is interesting about this word “perispao” is that it is a hapax legomenon—a term used in Biblical studies to refer to a word that only appears once in the Bible. When you come upon a hapax legomenon, it is important to notice it, because the word has a particular depth and texture that no other word in the Greek can address. So, while “perispao” it is translated as “distracted” it is not a simple distraction that is slaying Martha. It’s a monstrous dragon drawing her about her life, led by all she thinks she **should** be doing (and what others like her sister should be doing, according to outer norms.) She’s literally out of control, being dragged here and there by social pressure, internal pressure, and maybe, as one pastor comments, her Enneagram number.

The pressure driving Martha is fear—of not living up to perceived expectations of shoulds and oughts. Her endless lists of pouring the water for washing for her guests, of setting the table and preparing the food are not the problems, the problem is that they aren’t being done from her god-space, her sense of call, or a deep trust of being enough because she is beloved.

Isn’t this the dragon Lars faces too? A fire-breathing fear that drags him away from possibility of a rich life? (We could pathologize Lars with a diagnosis, but here is the thing, we aren’t clinicians.) Early in the movie, we learn he is scared for Karin’s impending birth~~because of the trauma of his own mother dying while giving birth to him. This wounding fear causes him to withdraw from others.

The tender care of the community offered Lars a way to be freed from his dragon of fear that controlled his every interaction. By their acceptance of his beloved Bianca, taking her presence seriously, the grip of his dragon sized fear was loosened and it’s power was weakened.

Fear lost its rule through the rule of love.

I think we all have dragons within us that need our attention, which are longing to be tamed by love. It is so easy for us to be drawn about by the events of our lives, rather than living from the center of our beings—that place of intention, the ground of our souls and spirits and body-selves. The place where fear doesn’t rule, but love is the rule.

In the Velveteen Rabbit, Rabbit asks “What Is Real?” The Skin Horse responds with the rule of love. "Real isn't how you are made, it's a thing that happens to you.”

Jesus (Love) happened to Martha, and according to legend she was able to tame dragons. At the very least, she became more “real” and was able to follow her calling as a do-er. There is some evidence that Martha actually was a leader in the early church, establishing a community that followed the Way of Jesus. Lars became real because of a doll named Bianca—who allowed a community to love him.

Friends, let’s embrace this rule of love.

Let’s set out today—to not only love others into their real-ness, but allow others to help us tame our dragons through their love, to love us into our own “real-ness.”

Because really, whatever it means, life is truly all about becoming real.

Amen

**SOURCES**

Working Preacher for Sunday, July 20, [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)

Curious Rambler blog, <https://curiousrambler.com/saint-martha-and-the-tarasque/#:~:text=>

Rev. Steve Pankey, Draughting Theology, 7.15.2019, <https://draughtingtheology.wordpress.com/2019/07/15/distracted/> Rev, Steve Pankey

**READINGS**

**Luke 10:38-42** Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home.She had a sister named Mary, who sat at Jesus's feet and listened to what he was saying.

But Martha was distracted by her many tasks, so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her, then, to help me."

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things, but few things are needed--indeed only one. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.”

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**from The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams**

"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 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."