

We're Alive!

One day, when I was walking Ellie back home from school, Ellie asked me, "Grandpa, are you real?"

I stopped dead in my tracks. "Well of course I am," I croaked.

The young girl pouted. "That's what everyone tells me," she said. "But I'm not so sure."

"Really? What makes you say that?"

"Damien told me that his brother said everyone just thinks other things exist. But we can't be sure anyone else exists, or even that *anything* else exists. We're just imagining all of it."

I sighed. "You need to stop listening to Damien so much," I chastised. "He keeps putting crazy ideas in your head."

"But how do I know you're real? How do I know I'm not just imagining everything?"

She sounded close to crying, and I couldn't bear to see her like that. I thought about it. Then I smiled wanly. "That, my dear, is an excellent question." I pulled off my glasses. "Hold these, will you?"

Ellie gingerly grabbed the glasses and looked at them.

"What are those?" I asked her.

She stared at them. "Uh... they're your glasses."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I'm holding them."

"Exactly," I said. "You know they exist because you can feel them with your hands and see them with your eyes."

"But that's the *point*," she puffed impatiently. "I'm just *imagining* that I'm holding glasses, and that they're black and clear and have all the bits glasses have. And I'm just

imagining you giving me these glasses. You can't even prove you're real!" She threw the glasses on the floor and sat down, tears streaking down her red cheeks.

I bent down to retrieve the dented frames. "Really?" I muttered. "I just purchased these."

"Who cares?" Ellie shouted. "It's not real. *Nothing* is real!" She buried her face in her hands.

I remained calm. I was starting to see how to help her. "But you thought you had glasses in your hands," I pressed.

She sniffled. "Yes."

"You felt them and looked at them and you said they were glasses, correct?"

She pulled her hands away from her face and glared at me. "Yes."

"So you used your eyes and your fingers to grab a *thing*," I explained, "and you decided that *thing* was a set of glasses."

"Yes!"

"That means you used your senses to obtain information," I said. "You used your head to make sense of that information and reach a conclusion. You put together what you know about glasses and what you sensed about the thing in your hands and concluded that you were holding a pair of glasses."

Ellie's eyebrows scrunched together. "What?"

I placed the glasses back over my eyes. "Okay," I tried again. "What do you do in school?"

She picked at a scab on her knee. "Learn."

“Yes. And when you learn, you add that new knowledge to everything else you’ve learned. You take everything your teacher shows you and combine it with everything else you’ve seen and heard, what you’ve felt and what you’ve tasted and smelled.”

“I don’t get it.”

I sighed. “If your head is filled with all the things you’ve learned, then what’s keeping it all together up there? Why doesn’t it all just fly away?”

I watched as Ellie worked through this thought. “Because there’s something holding it there?” she asked.

I beamed at her. “Precisely! And you’re not the one doing that, are you?”

“I... I guess not.”

“Indeed. That something holding it all together is a set of rules that let you know things. And they’re the same rules that let me know things, and that let every human on earth know things. The rules are your mind and your senses working together. And that lets you look at things and decide for yourself what those things are.”

“Like a pair of glasses?”

“Yes. That means you are not the only person in the universe, because you can perceive things other than yourself and then think about it.”

“Huh.” A fresh thought made Ellie’s face contort with disgust. “But sometimes I’m wrong about things. And adults are wrong, too. So what’s the real truth?”

“No one knows,” I admitted. “We may never know.”

“So the truth could be, ‘No one except Ellie exists,’” she muttered sullenly.

I decided to play my strongest card. “Okay, Ellie,” I said softly, “have you thought about how I could say the exact same thing about myself, that I’m the only human that exists? That *you’re* just a figment of my imagination?”

Ellie looked askance. “But I’m real!” she exclaimed.

“Yes, you are,” I said. “So is it fair of me to think that you’re not real, just because I can’t prove to myself that you are?”

“No, of course not!”

“So we’re both real. Everyone you see is real and alive. We’re all alive. So don’t say I don’t exist, because I do.” I held my hand out to her. “Now let’s stop talking about such weighty matters and go home, shall we?”

She looked up in my eyes, then took my hand. “Alright, Grandpa.”

We began walking again down the sidewalk.

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