

Where is Mister Rogers When We Need Him?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)

Unitarian Universalist

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Meditation and Prayer

We are invited to meditation, prayer, and silence....

We are among friends and neighbors here, whether this is the first time for some, or the thousandth time for others.

So... may we rest, ease our minds and hearts, knowing this is a safe place, a safe time... to renew and restore our spirits, to be held... in this ancient house of love, to be held by one another and by love.

And within this time of quiet, prayers, yearnings of the heart, may arise...

Prayers for anyone we know who is meeting a life challenge or illness or grief of whatever kind...

Prayers especially this day for those who have been victims of sexual violence at any time in their lives, for we know the renewed memories and feelings may be very powerful right now; and may we hear and heed their voices if and when they choose to speak out...

Prayers for our democracy and our leaders, that wisdom will have its day, that respect will have its day...

Prayers for peace and justice, and the well-being of all... all neighbors, whether far or near, whomever they are, whomever they love, whatever they believe...

Readings

Ephesians 4:25-27,29, 31-32a

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear...

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another...

from *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers*, by Maxwell King

Fred's social leanings were strongly progressive, but he learned from both his seminary experience and his television role to be circumspect about his views. Fred's nature was the opposite of quarrelsome, and he eschewed the endless left-right debates (of the seminary). Some of his friends in Pittsburgh were disappointed that Fred didn't speak out publicly on behalf of the disadvantaged or vocally champion tolerance and inclusion, the values in which he so fervently believed. But Rogers worried that such public posturing would cause confusion with the parents and children he reached on television. And he always felt that actions – kindness, understanding, and openness in relationships – were more important than words.

Sermon

About thirty years ago our daughter, with our help, sent a letter to Mister Rogers. Something on a particular program had scared her, and she wanted to tell Mister Rogers about this. Well, not too much time passed before she received a reply. We can't find Mister Rogers' letter now – we're hoping we have it somewhere. But the main point is that he wrote back, and not surprisingly was understanding and reassuring.

It was a beautiful thing.

And among all that I've learned in reading Maxwell King's new biography of Fred Rogers is this, that he had a hand in every letter responding to a child or to parents. The flow of letters had become a torrent as the years went by, and of necessity he hired someone to compose responses; but he still looked at every letter and every response, editing the response if necessary, before it went to the mailbox.

This is who Fred Rogers was: not only kind and generous, as we all know by now, but someone who fulfilled his responsibilities with a deeply engrained sense of duty, wanting everything he did to be done as well as possible – every program, every talk, every relationship.

And over and over again – in the book as in the film about Mister Rogers that I expect many of you have seen – those who knew him well, from family members to friends and close colleagues, members of the production crew, the guy who took care of the locker room where Rogers swam every day... everyone says that the Mister Rogers we saw for decades on the *Neighborhood* was the Fred Rogers they knew the rest of the time.

How remarkable is that. No pretense, no artifice, just being who he was – and we liked him just the way he was!

This said, he didn't wing it on the set. Part of who he was thorough, with a dedication to excellence; so every program was carefully scripted, and for years every

script of every program was reviewed by the renowned child development expert Dr. Margaret McFarland

Because Fred Rogers believed that children deserved the highest quality television possible, programming that respected the whole child, that respected a child's feelings above all, and that understood and appropriately addressed the fears and concerns that children, particularly young children, naturally have.

But deeper than the careful research and scripting was that Fred Rogers never lost touch with his own experience of what it was like to be a child – not that he was childish, but that he always remembered what it was like. This enabled him to be so deeply empathetic to children, whether in individual encounters or to his television friends. In this regard he once told someone who was new to the program and who would be voicing one of the puppets, “somehow you must remember what it was like to be a child.”

Actually, good advice for all of us, isn't it? Not just as we raise or teach children, but as we live.

Okay, how did Fred Rogers become Mister Rogers? Here's a too-brief biographical answer:

He was raised in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. His parents were quite wealthy, and as a younger child Fred was somewhat sickly – including having asthma in the midst of the then polluted air of the Pittsburgh area. In addition, his wealth and privilege made him a sort of target among his schoolmates; so it wasn't until high school that he began to truly earn the respect of his peers because of his musical and academic accomplishments.

But throughout, he was blessed by parents who loved him and understood him. This included being blessed by the example of his parents' great generosity in the community, often through their church, often anonymously. If they knew someone was in need, they found a way to meet that need.

Further, he was blessed by a loving church community, a church that taught and strived to live by those qualities we heard outlined in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, a passage I expect was quite familiar to Rogers.

And, growing up Fred found early comfort in his loneliness through puppets, making up puppet plays, performing for his parents or a friend. His musical talent, too, particularly on the piano, was also evident quite early on.

A little later, after a terrible year at Dartmouth, with a college culture not at all suitable for someone of Fred's temperament and interests, he found a place for himself at Rollins College in Florida, a school with particularly strong music programs and a student body much more compatible to Fred's personality – including a young woman, Joanne, also a fine pianist, who eventually became his wife.

Then, the path from college to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* included his time in seminary as well as early jobs in the nascent television industry, first in commercial TV

and then at the very beginnings of public television – in New York, Pittsburgh, and for several years in Canada, before finally landing for good in Pittsburgh.

In seminary, in addition to all the courses in religion, Bible, ethics, and so forth, Fred began his lifelong education in child development.

There is, of course, plenty more detail to these years of childhood and early adulthood, but the point is that Fred Rogers gradually found a way to bring his particular gifts and talents and skills to his vocation as an ordained minister whose ministry was the care of children through thoughtful, understanding, compassionate television programs.

Now, why do I ask the question “Where is Mister Rogers When We Need Him?”?

Perhaps needless to say: We live in a time of heightened partisanship, a time of anger and vitriol from the hearing rooms of the Senate to the viral world of social media, social media that was only just beginning when Fred Rogers died – far too young – in 2003 at age 75. So, in this toxic environment, when too many are more likely to shout at each other than to listen, how can we find ways of bringing to the fore the values Fred Rogers so clearly manifested and championed?

We know what those values are:

Kindness above all. Mutual understanding. Generosity. Love. The importance of listening – above all to our children, but, when it comes down to it, equally importantly to each other, respecting the worth and dignity of every person (most certainly including a woman survivor of sexual assault).

A few signature moments in the *Neighborhood* illustrate the way Mister Rogers manifested these and other core values:

How he matter-of-factly talked with a boy in a wheelchair, asking him how the wheelchair worked, how he dealt with living in a wheelchair, why he needed to be in a wheelchair... all as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

How, during the rancor of the civil rights movement he and Francois Clemmons (fine opera singer and “Officer Clemmons” on the show) relaxed their feet side by side in a wading pool, white feet next to black feet (remember the swimming pool conflicts during that time?), and then how Mister Rogers dried Clemmons’ feet – an unspoken echo of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.

And how with such sensitivity and understanding Rogers focused programs on divorce, on the assassinations of 1968, on the Challenger disaster, as well as on more daily fears related to such things as visits to doctors and dentists. This week, we can only imagine how Mister Rogers would bring his sensitivity and understanding to the fears of children as they hear stories of sexual assault.

Then, as I’ve said, everyone who knew him testifies that Fred Rogers outside the studio was the same man as inside:

One example: He took a visiting friend to the airport. Upon learning that the flight was delayed by several hours, did Rogers leave his friend there with a good book and best wishes? No, he stayed until his friend boarded hours later.

Then there was the time he was to be interviewed on the Oprah Winfrey show. Fred and his staff had asked that no children be present in the studio audience, since they knew that if children were present, all Rogers' attention would go to the children and the interview would pretty much be over.

Well, turns out the audience was filled with families. And after the interview on the stage, Oprah invited questions from the audience. Not surprisingly, before long children were asking questions, running up to the stage – and Fred Rogers became Mister Rogers (as Maxwell King recounts), bending over to be completely present to each child, taking all the time in the world with every question, everything starting to move in slow motion – not good television, with Oprah standing “in the audience looking more than a little lost.” So then, “seeing that the show was slipping away from her, she signaled her crew to break to an ad.”

In short, the question today isn't only about the values themselves, which we all share: kindness, understanding, generosity, responsibility, and the rest.

The question is whether reflecting on the life of Fred Rogers, Mister Rogers, can help us not to become just like him – after all, he liked *us* just the way *we* each already are – but how to live and manifest these values each in our unique ways. Perhaps keeping in mind along the way this little exchange on a *Neighborhood* program about Santa Claus:

Daniel Striped Tiger is “alarmed” when he learns that Santa is going to visit the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. For Daniel knows the lyrics of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town”, and (as Maxwell King describes it), “is afraid of someone who knows so much. When you've been good or bad.”

“Santa Claus? What's he going to do to us?” Daniel asks. “Oh, I try to be good. But I'm not always good. I think I'm afraid of Santa Claus. I wish he weren't coming here.”

Well, when Santa arrives, Daniel tells him that he is not always good. Santa replies, “Good people aren't always good. They just try to be.”

Maybe we've heard all we need to know. Hold fast to the values we know matter so deeply, values that for Fred Rogers grew out of his Christian faith, but that he knew and we know are universal, and then just try our best in whatever ways suit our lives, our gifts and talents, our work, our daily interactions with family and friends and everyone we encounter.

All in the spirit of those words of Fred Rogers at the top of your order of worship today:

“The real issue in life is not how many blessings we have,
but what we do with our blessings.
Some people have many blessings and hoard them.
Some have few and give everything away.”

Which has nothing to do with the spirit of partisanship, as you heard in the reading, the drawing of battle lines whether about matters religious, social, or political. Rather, it’s about letting values speak for themselves – for Rogers through his television neighborhood and through his life; for us in whatever unique ways our lives offer.

I’d like to draw toward a conclusion with two more brief messages from Fred Rogers.

In his last commencement address, given ironically at the Dartmouth he’d left after only a year, he said:

I’m very much interested in choices, and what it is and who it is that enable us human beings to make the choices we make all through our lives. What choices lead to ethnic cleansing? What choices lead to healing? What choices lead to the destruction of the environment, the erosion of the Sabbath, suicide bombings or teenagers shooting teachers? What choices encourage heroism in the midst of chaos?

And earlier in his career, in another talk, he said this:

... as we find ourselves being concerned about the conditions that make life on Earth possible, we will recognize the need to make people more important than things, and we will join hands with young and old alike by putting our dominant energies into developing a sane design for living.

So, where is he now when we need him – this wonderful, not perfect (yes, he had his quirks and foibles) but wonderful man?

Easy: in our hearts and lives every time we listen, really listen, to a child or to one another, every time we heed the generous impulse, every time we scatter our blessings, whether few or many, with lavish hand to our friends, our neighborhood, our nation, our world... wherever we go, whomever we are with.

So may it be.