

THE SPIRITUALTY OF MISTER ROGERS  
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Before addressing the announced topic of this talk - The Spirituality Mister Rogers - I should take note of the two occasions which have prompted the presentation – one public and one personal.

Publically, something happened in 2018 about which I am sure many of you are aware. Then there was a national marking of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the launching of the Mister Rogers' Neighborhood TV series. With that attention came a revived interest in Fred Rogers himself. There was the making of the movie about him, entitled, "Won't You Be My Neighbor?", as produced and directed by Nicholas Ma, the son of the famous cellist Yo-Yo Ma. Both father and son, as a youngster on the piano, performed a duet on the Neighborhood show. From that early experience, Nicholas later made the movie.

Concurrently, PBS was featuring its own remembrance of Fred's life and work on a special, with the same title as his song 'It's You I like,' under the direction of well-known actor Michael Keaton, who happened as a boy to have worked on the Neighborhood crew, including running the trolley through the tunnel into and out-of the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Then there is the movie "A Beautiful Day", released with Tom Hanks portraying Rogers as he became friends with journalist Tom Junod, who was writing an article about him for a 1998 edition of Esquire magazine.

Even the post office issued a stamp in 2018 of Mr. Rogers holding his puppet King Friday. There had been nothing like this renewed attention to Rogers' work since his death in 2003.

All this commemoration has been in recognition of how much of an influence Mister Rogers' Neighborhood has continued to have over the past sixteen years since he died, as he had exerted it for the thirty three-years, following the 1968 debut of the series, upon as many as 8 million viewers at a given time. In addition, The Neighborhood gained four Emmys and a Peabody Award. For Rogers himself a Lifetime Achievement Award was bestowed by the American Association of Broadcasters as well as his being the recipient of countless awards and honorary degrees for his having served as the creator, host, writer of 200 songs and thirteen short operas, and the principal puppeteer of the program.

We now come to the personal occasion which originally led to my sharing this talk with you. It was in April, 1998 that I had the honor of visiting with Fred in his Pittsburgh studio office after my attending a conference in Pittsburgh of the Presbyterian Communicators. I was then leading in the Media Literacy outreach for the denomination as a Volunteer in Mission, following my retirement as a parish pastor. Media Literacy, i.e. spreading the gospel of Marshal McLuhan - that the "media is the message," that it is not the content which is so much communicated, but the change of consciousness which mass media engenders, a process that leads to such changes as shortened attention spans and in which viewers are so immersed as not to be aware of it – like the proverbial fish when asked how it likes living in the ocean, answers, "What ocean?"

While at the meeting, another attendee, who happened to come from the Pittsburgh locality, asked if I would be interested in meeting Fred Rogers. “Of course!” I said. Soon thereafter, I was led into Fred’s office, introduced, and immediately noticed the row of puppets on the top of the couch where he was sitting. That setting and the immediacy of his interest in me made me feel that “what you see is what you get” - in person, as he is on TV.

So instead of talking to him about what I had originally intended - about my having hosted interfaith TV series in Chicago, then in Austin, Texas over the years, and how that had led to my doing media literacy, so positively embodied by “Mister Rogers Neighborhood” - instead of all that, I spoke to Fred about what was on my broken heart at that moment - the recent death of Margaret, my beloved wife of 42-years, and of my sorrow at her never getting to know her grandchildren in Germany - Clara, her two-year old granddaughter and soon-to-be -born grandchild, who was to be named Milena.

It was at that point that my relationship to Mr. Rogers was established. For he instantly said, in effect, “If you can’t be near the ones you love, you love the ones you are near.” The way he put it was with the suggestion that when I returned home, to Austin at the time, that I find a preschool and sing to the children there the way I would to my own grandchildren, and as if Margaret were there to hear.

I later took his advice, through the El Buen Pastor preschool, which, as it happened, Margaret helped found. I brought my guitar, made up a song for the little ones who may not have had a dad at home, and while using an electric razor, sang these lyrics: “Whiskers, whiskers, they feel so rough...but when I shave them off my face feels so nice and soft,” inviting the children to feel the difference. I did, indeed, find the experience healing. Thus, in his helping meet my need for solace, I experienced first-hand the warmth of his empathy and creativity of Mr. Rogers’ spirituality.

That visit led to an eventual exchange of letters, with his answering, amid the multitude of letters he received from others over the years – all that he wrote by hand – with these exchanges in themselves having been an expression of his authenticity, his spirituality. Even in Fort Collins now my hometown, I learned of one receiving an answer from him about whether he had created sex education for young children. He wrote, “...we do all the time...the problem with most sex education is that it is separate from simply growing and ‘being.’ You might be interested in our book, Mister Rogers Talks With Parents.”

Also it should be noted that I have drawn from a variety of other sources in defining Rogers’ spirituality. The earliest of these is from the 2005 book, The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers, by Amy Hollingsworth. In 2015, Michael G. Long, associate professor religious studies at Elizabethtown College, wrote Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mr. Rogers. As of 2018, Maxwell King, who heads up the Pittsburgh Community Foundation wrote The Good Neighbor: the Life and Work of Fred Rogers. Most recently, Shea Tuttle, an author on religion, has written Exactly As You Are The Life and Faith of Mr. Rogers. Also in 2019, Life magazine published “Mister Rogers: The Magical World of an American Icon.” So my presentation serves as a gathering from these sources, as well as from my own experience with him.

But, to gain better perspective on how spirituality infused his work, we would do well to take a look at the story of his life. He was born Fred McFeeley Rogers on March 20, 1928. in Latrobe, Pennsylvania,

the community forty miles from Pittsburgh, His death from stomach cancer occurred on February 20, 2003, just a month short of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.

He was the only child for eleven years of Jim Rogers and Nancy McFeely Rogers, until they adopted a baby girl, whom they named Laney. She became the in-house audience for her older brother's puppet show in the third-story attic of their home. That residence itself bespoke a remarkable wealth, which originated with Fred's maternal great grandfather, who upon his death in 1922 left an estate worth five and a half-million dollars, equal to 70 million today – most of it in the stock of RCA, from which came NBC.

Fred's mother arranged for a chauffeur to drive Fred to school each day, which made him an outlier there. One day when the chauffeur did not show up, he had to walk the ten blocks home, with a gang of bullies behind, threatening him with "We're going to get you fat Freddie!" To deal with the weight issue, Fred, for a while took up the Charles Atlas body building program; then he began to swim daily. As he grew into his adult years, he always kept his weight at 143 pounds, for which he matched each number with a letter, equaling "I love you."

His mother was also known for her generosity to the Latrobe Presbyterian Church and to the needy of the community. For the local young men serving in WWI, she knit sweaters, just as she later made cardigans for her son, at least one of which found its way into the Smithsonian.

Fred's father Jim ran the family businesses – the McFeely Coal Co, and the Tool and Die Co - and so always hoped his son would eventually join him in the business. Nevertheless, he supported Fred's later decision to go into television.

Fred was also especially close to his namesake grandfather McFeely, who would say, "Freddie, visiting with you always makes it a special day." It was his grandmother, who learning of his interest in music, bought Fred a Steinway grand piano – nine feet long and weighing a thousand pounds – an instrument which he later had moved to wherever he lived.

When it came to college, he chose Dartmouth for its Romance languages, which he loved. But he came to love music even more (later writing 200 songs and three short operas for the Neighborhood) and when finding the school lacking in that regard and learned that a small Presbyterian school in Florida, Rollins College had the kind of program he wanted, he transferred there, where he found both the music and his later-to-be wife, Joanne.

Meanwhile, his father Jim learned of his son's passion for the new media of television when Fred came home from college in 1951 and, upon seeing TV for the first time, was deeply disturbed by how this potentially great force for education was stooping to the lowest, pie-in-your-face level. He was especially upset over how demeaning the programs were for children, whom he learned, watched a 1000 hours of TV before starting school. So after college, Fred went to New York and worked at NBC, becoming the floor manager of the Amahl and the Night Visitors special and on the Kate Smith Hour. There he learned the technical side of the new business and was encouraged to stay and make a career out of commercial TV.

Instead, he returned to Pittsburgh, where he helped get public television underway and with a partner, Josie Carey, started a series called The Children's Corner. She was the one on-camera, while he did the puppetry and was otherwise behind the scenes.

During that time, Fred also fulfilled a long-time ambition to study for the ministry. In-between breaks in the show's production, he would drive across the city to PTS – Pittsburgh Theological Seminary – where he earned a degree. He later convinced the Presbytery to ordain him to the Ministry of Children's Television, but only after resistance to it not being to Word and Sacrament. Later he tried, unsuccessfully, to get the denomination to underwrite the Neighborhood.

Meanwhile, the Canadian Broadcasting Co. came on the air and among its leaders was one, who having heard about The Children's Corner, asked Fred and his partner to bring their show to Toronto. There the producers recognized how well Fred related to children and so had him come before the cameras and called the show MisterRogers. So that name, with its addition, continued after he returned to Pittsburg and began to plan what became Mister Rogers' Neighborhood.

Earlier in the 60s, after he and Joanne married and had their first child Johnny, they had to take the boy at age 16 months to the hospital for treatment of a hernia condition. Upon arrival the child was immediately put into a crib cage and wheeled down the hall weeping as he was separated from his mother and father. This trauma, both for Johnny and his parents, carried over into later years and became the living proof to Fred that separation from family was the worst thing that could happen to children.

Then, back at the WQED studio, in consultation by Margaret McFarland, who was then Dean and one of the three co-founders, along with Benjamin Spock and Erik Erikson, of the Arsenal School of the Family Child Development Center in 1953, it was there that Fred became part of the movement away from the Victorian view of childhood (as in "Children are to be seen, not heard). The new emphasis was on social and emotional development, not just the cognitive, as with Sesame Street which became noted for teaching children their ABCs. McFarland also emphasized the value of storytelling and of taking the viewers out into the world via the "Picture-Picture" feature. But what Fred added to the equation was the spiritual dimension. He eventually came to say that "Love is the root of everything – love or the lack of it."

From that point on Fred Rogers' remarkable television career commenced. Not only did fame come to him, but an abiding affection of several generations of viewers. This bonding with the multitude who began watching his program as preschoolers was evident in the early sixties when the precursor of The Neighborhood was broadcast in the Boston area. The station managers, in announcing a day for children and their parents to come meet him there, expected 500 to show up. Instead; 5000 lined up as far as Harvard Yard.

Then, by the late 90s, when he was invited for an interview on the Oprah Winfrey Show, Roger's manager said he would agree if there were to be no children or parents in the studio. While seemingly inconsistent with his practice of always welcoming children, they knew what would happen – and it did, after Winfrey's people didn't comply with the request. When Rogers entered the studio, he was mobbed by little ones, each of whom wanted a hug. Oprah then had little time to interview him.

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As for religion, Bob Faw. when reporting the death of Rogers on NBC Nightly News said, "Mr. Rogers never preached, nor even mentioned God on his show. He never had to. His gentle care of children embodied what St. Francis taught, "Preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words."

This perspective coincides with what Joanne Rogers said of her late husband, “Fred would often make the distinction between religiosity and spirituality, ” Her recollection was reported by Amy Hollingsworth, who had for eight years written children’s programs for CBN, the Christian Broadcasting Network. She engaged Rogers in a series of interviews and correspondence from 1994 until his death nine-years later, leading to a relationship upon which she based her book, The Simple Faith of Mister Rogers.

Hollingsworth recalls that she was able to get such an audience with him initially, from having sent him a copy of the refutation she had written to Don Feder, columnist at the Boston Herald who had criticized Rogers for what he called “Psychobabble Day in the Neighborhood,” i.e. teaching little ones to like themselves as they were, ignoring the need to change themselves when behaving rottenly. Hollingsworth said Feder had misread Fred; rather that Rogers was an advocate for setting limits and for virtuous behavior. After receiving her letter and request to meet, Fred agreed to do so. In her book, she identified the following elements of his spiritual life.

First, be a good neighbor. Hollingsworth wrote: “If there is a central biblical theme to “Mr. Rogers Neighborhood,,” it is this: the program wasn’t named after Mister Rogers alone but after his community of neighbors. His definition of a neighbor was simple - the person you happen to be with at the moment – whether a television viewer or a person in need, as was the waylaid traveler in Jesus; parable.”

A second spiritual element was the practice of going and doing things slowly; also to allow for silence. Hollingsworth quotes Rogers as saying, “... our world needs more time to wonder and to reflect about what is inside, and if we take time we can often go much deeper as far as our spiritual life is concerned, than if there is constant distraction – noise and fast-paced things.”

Hollingsworth observed that as each episode opens with the daily ritual of Mr. Rogers replacing his jacket with a cardigan, and business shoes with sneakers, then feeding the fish, the message was, “It’s time to slow down.” This all happens on television, where we are so accustomed to “the faster the better” pace.

He also allowed time for silence, at the end of the myriad commencement speeches he made, or while accepting an Emmy for Lifetime Achievement from the Academy of Arts and Sciences, when he bade his listeners to take the time of calling to mind “special ones who had loved you into being...ten seconds of silence. I’ll watch the time.”

A third element of spirituality Hollingsworth identifies was his daily practice of prayer as a relationship and as a gift of the Holy Spirit. She reports his saying in a 1994 interview, “I am convinced that the space between the television set and the viewer is holy ground.” She adds that he said, “When I walk into the studio door each day, I say, “Dear God, let some word that is heard this day, be yours.”

Still another dimension of spirituality about which Hollingsworth wrote pertained to Fred’s views about death. He once said, “I have friends who are in heaven and I know they inspire me.” In that way he was echoing what his friend Henri Nouwen wrote in his book, Finding My Way Home. There

Nouwen stated, “When leaving this world, it will be possible for us, like Jesus, to send our spirit of love to our friends – our greatest gift to them.”

Last, but not least. In her listing of Rogers’ spiritual dimension, was found in the answer that Fred gave her when Amy Hollingsworth asked him, “If you had one final broadcast, to address your television neighbors, to tell them your single most important lesson, what would you say?”

She then reports: “Fred paused for a moment and said ever so slowly, “Well, I would want whoever was listening to know that they had unique value, that there isn’t anybody in the whole world exactly like them and that there never has been and never will be. And that they are loved by the Person who created them in a unique way. And if they had that behind their eyes and look on their neighbors and realize ‘My neighbor has unique value too and there has never been anybody in the whole world like my neighbor, and never will be’ – they could love that person in ways that we know that the Eternal loves us, then we would be very grateful.”

At that time, Rogers was repeating what unconditional acceptance meant, (even felt by the 200 pound gorilla Coco, with whom he hugged in an iconic episode) - an unconditional love which he put into the lyrics of such songs as:

It’s you I like It’s not the things you wear or how you do your hair...  
It’s nothing beside you, but what’s down deep inside you...  
and  
I like you as you are, I think you turned out nicely, I’ll shout it to a star!  
I like you as you are, I wouldn’t want to change you, or even rearrange you, not by far.

Certainly, this affirmation of self-worth relates to how important he knew it was to be honest with yourself and true to your own feelings. You can tell that by the way he took a quote from scripture and gave it this meaning in these lyrics to the song, “The Truth Will Make Me Free”:

What if I could know the truth  
And say just how I feel?  
I think I’d learn a lot that’s real  
About freedom.

Of course. Rogers’ use of scripture should come as no surprise, considering his upbringing in a devout family of the Latrobe Presbyterian Church and after his years of study at Pittsburgh Presbyterian Seminary.

Maxwell King reports on another dimension of Roger’s spirituality, one which went back to his days of study with the seminary’s Systematic Theologian Bill Orr. Fred was drawn to Orr’s idea of “guided drift.” Fred developed this idea himself in the chapter “Guided Drift” in his book Life’s Journeys According to Mr. Rogers, where he wrote, “You’re drifting, and yet you’ve got a rudder.” He added, “Sometimes it surprises me to think that my work on that first children’s television program was almost by chance! Isn’t it mysterious how so many wonderful things in life come to us seemingly

without our planning?" That mystical sense is what Fred Rogers often repeated and kept framed as a print on his wall, "What is essential is invisible to the eye." It's from Antoine de Saint-Exupery's The Little Prince.

Still another element in Roger's spiritual life was his moral conviction. This was especially evident when the Neighborhood program was becoming so popular that he was approached often by commercial networks to take the program to companies asking to advertise on it. To all of these offers, Rogers refused, saying that children were not able to distinguish between the advertising and the program. He was so adamant on the subject that one of the people who was trying to change his mind came out of the meeting saying, "How old do you have to get until Mr. Rogers doesn't say any more, "I like you as you are."?"

While Fred Rogers never entered the political arena, he was asked to testify before the Senate Committee headed by Senator John Pastore in 1969 when public television was under threat because President Nixon wanted the money to go for the Vietnam War. After explaining in his gentle way how his program dealt with children differently than others on TV, such as explaining "What do you do with the mad that you feel?" Pastore then declared, "You've just got your 22 million dollars." Rogers had just then saved public television!

In regard to the moral dimension of spirituality, Michael G. Long, in his book on the "Countercultural Mister Rogers," tells of 'Discovering the real and radical Fred Rogers...The Fred Rogers I have come to know was no namby-pamby, meek and mild pushover, but a hard-driving, principled creator of children's program designed to subvert huge parts of public policies that enshrined violence, discrimination and injustice,, as they negatively affected the children and families who comprised his viewing audience.'

And when it came to dramatizing how to confront discrimination, at a time when people were being denied access to public swimming pools because of their race, there was the iconic scene with Francois Clemmons, who, as an African-American cast member, played the police officer in the neighborhood. He is shown finding Mister Rogers in the front yard soaking his feet in a wading pool on a hot day, who then invites Officer Clemmons to join him. After Clemmons says that he'd like to, but has no towel, Rogers says that the officer can use his towel and then subsequently helped him dry his feet. The scene brings to mind how Jesus expressed his love for his disciples by washing and drying their feet.

The discrimination which Rogers was also addressing in this episode was in regard to homosexuality. For Clemmons had just come out to Fred as being gay, who then was showing his acceptance of him, nevertheless. It should be noted too, that at Rogers' memorial service, in addition to the beauty of violinist Isak Pearlman's surprise appearance and performance, there were protestors carrying ugly-worded signs outside from the Westboro Baptist Church of Kansas.

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Its founder, Fred Phelps explained, that the protest was due to how "Fred Rogers gave aid and comfort to homosexuals." Actually, Rogers would not have denied that claim, as evidenced by his having become active in Sixth Presbyterian Church, which since 1997 had been part of a movement called The More Light Presbyterians – those who supported gays and lesbians.

Finally, we come to the matter of how enduring Fred Rogers influence has been. Certainly, the Fred Rogers Company, as the non-profit successor to Family Communications, is still making available replays of the original program, while producing the new series "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood." Also,

Saint Vincent's College in Latrobe has established the Mister Roger's Center for Early Childhood Learning and Media, thereby preserving his legacy.

There have been the times of national tragedy, when Roger's spirit and words continue to be invoked as he continues to be cited as The Consoler of the Nation. From the 1960s, in the aftermath of the slayings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, Rogers spoke of assassinations as it effected children, assuring them that loved ones remained nearby.

Again, in the wake of 9/11, he was asked to bring a word of consolation to people of all ages. To this he repeated what he had said before, quoting his mother who told him, "When you see scary things, just remember to look for the helpers. You will always find those who come to help."

Joanne Rogers, Fred's widow, was on point, when in June, 2018 she was asked on the Today Show by host Megyn Kelly, "What would Mister. Rogers be saying today?" Joanne replied how disturbed he would be at the government's policy of separating children from their parents at the border, without any guarantee of their being reunited.

How fitting, too, that his memory should have been invoked in the wake of the massacre in the Synagogue on Squirrel Hill, where the worst of all slayings of the Jewish people in American history occurred, in the community where Rogers had once lived,. He could certainly have offered comfort to the bereaved, as he did with his citation of "tikkun olam," the Hebraic concept defined by acts of kindness performed to repair the world.

There was the recent news report of Donald Trump calling Dan Coates, then Director of National Intelligence, who was acting independently of the President – of his calling him "Mister Rogers" - spoken as an insult to Coates for being like what he thought Rogers to have been - weak. Yet Rogers' was a pillar of strength as attested to by many.

His strength and spirituality was evidenced in what Maxwell King called "Fearless Authenticity," as he gave that title to a chapter in his book, where he cites Tom Jounod, the Esquire journalist, who concluded that Rogers was an "incredibly powerful person," because he was the "identical, authentic person in every setting...who treated everyone the same, from the President of PBS...to the little girl who stopped him on the street to get his autograph." So too vouched Betty Aberlin who played Lady Aberlin on the show, who came to it from a place in New York City, which she said was more like Eddie Murphy's "Mr. Robinson's Neighborhood." At first, she skeptically thought "Right, this is a Good Housekeeping kind of thing." Years later, she confessed that she was the one with the "skewed reality," as "Fred was modeling kindness."

So may it be said of us all, to the end of our days, that "What you see is what you get," as it was of Mister Rogers.

#### APPENDIX