

Opening Words

Children widen the circle of our being in ways that are limitless.

Every baby that's born connects us to our history, our own parents, grandparents and unknown forbears who brought new life to the world in each successive generation.

Every baby that's born links us to the future, to a world yet to come that belongs to our descendants and that we hold in trust for our posterity whom we will never know.

Each child connects us to nature, to the innocence and exuberance of a world always hatching newborns: kittens and pups and lambs and babes.

Each child reminds us of the kinship we share with people of other lands and races who love their young as purely and tenderly as we do.

Each child connects us to the universe, to the holy mysteries of birth and death and becoming from which we all emerge.

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Reading Fred Rogers

It's you I like,
It's not the things you wear,
It's not the way you do your hair—
But it's you I like
The way you are right now,
The way down deep inside you—
Not the things that hide you,
Not your toys—
They're just beside you.

But it's you I like—
Every part of you,
Your skin, your eyes, your feelings
Whether old or new.
I hope that you'll remember

Even when you're feeling blue
That it's you I like,
It's you yourself,
It's you, it's you I like.

Meditation

Maybe it's too much to ask to love our neighbor
But help us to like them and to like ourselves a little more
Find some gift to appreciate in our flawed human nature
And see the best in others
To judge them as we ourselves would wish to be judged
Not for our failings and flawed performance
But for our aspirations and good intentions
To see them as the children they once were,
Not saints and certainly not sinners but
Just kids beings kids

THE THEOLOGY OF MISTER ROGERS

When I say the words "television preacher," what are the images that come to mind? Maybe a figure like Joel Osteen with his gospel of success and prosperity, who wouldn't open the doors of his church when Houston was drowning in displaced and desperate evacuees after Hurricane Harvey flooded their homes last year. My guess is that the phrase "TV preacher" conjures up connotations of sleaze and unctuous piety served along with a generous dollop of good old-fashioned greed. But there is at least one clergyman on the airwaves who doesn't fit that mold. His broadcasts each day beam into more households than Billy Graham could reach in the course of a whole revival. In an era when many congregations complain about an aging membership and worry whether they can find a language that speaks to a coming generation, he manages to talk simply and directly to the youngest of the young. I mean, of course, Fred Rogers, the host of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, who as an ordained Presbyterian minister had one of the largest congregations in the country, the millions of children who still watch him each morning.

Mister Rogers died fifteen years ago but lives on through the magic of re-runs. Though it can be a little creepy to see him on screen singing "It's such a good feeling to know you're alive!" he has become even more popular since his

passing. A biopic titled *You Are My Friend* starring Tom Hanks will launch in theaters next year. And the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp this year to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his first broadcast, back in February of 1968. Appropriately, it's a Forever stamp.

I didn't grow up with Mr. Rogers. As a youngster, I watched Captain Kangaroo. But the fact that I still fondly remember Mr. Greenjeans, Bunny Rabbit, and the rest suggests what a lasting and formative influence television has upon the imagination of young viewers. I've forgotten my high school chemistry, and most of the things I learned in college, but I haven't forgotten Mr. Moose. That may be why Bob Keeshan, Captain Kangaroo himself, called Fred Rogers "the patron saint of children's television."

It was Dori, my wife, who first introduced me to Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, and helped me consider all it had to offer. It was almost thirty years ago, when we had just moved to New England with a brand new family. Both our children were under twelve months old. Son Noah had been born in Korea about the same time Dori got pregnant. And in the great diaper debate of the day, we choose cloth over disposable as more environmentally correct and contracted with a service to deliver 168 didies to our home each week, one for every hour of the day and night, seven days a week. It was a challenging time for all of us. For a while, Dori tried to continue the practice of law, but soon found that being a full time attorney married to a workaholic minister was more than a mother could handle, and we both decided that it made more sense for her to stay home with the kids than to pay for daycare on the salary of a Public Defender. It was a wise move, but had some unforeseen consequences. Before, when people at social gatherings had asked what she did for a living, Dori found there was always a spark of interest when she told them she was a criminal defense lawyer with a degree from Harvard. When she began telling them that she was a full time mom and homemaker, the response changed. People seemed to change the subject and begin glancing around the room, in search of a more interesting conversation partner. Caring for children, she found, was not a highly valued role in our society. At times it was hard to feel good about herself. And I'm sorry to say that I myself, caught up in the demands of a new job, was not always as supportive as I might have been. There was, though, at least one other adult she could count on to be emotionally present each day and offer encouragement when she was feeling low. Mr. Rogers, she said, always liked her "just the way she was."

Of course, I like Mr. Rogers because he was a vegetarian and went to bed at 9:30 p.m. each night (just like me), and we do seem to have the same good taste in

clothes. But those are just externals, and it's what's inside a person that Mr. Rogers cared about most. When Mr. Rogers said he liked you, you felt for some reason that he was being truthful, even though you knew he was talking to a mass audience of stressed-out moms and hyperactive tots. There didn't seem to be a phoney bone in his lanky, almost six foot tall body. By all accounts, he had the same, disarming persona on and off camera. That's why Fred Rogers was always careful to refer to his half-hour productions as "programs" rather than "shows." He was never a showman, or an entertainer, or an actor in any sense. Other kid fare may have subtle or not-so-subtle undertones of manipulation. Barney, the much-maligned purple dinosaur, seemed to envelop his audience in a warm-fuzzy embrace where only cheerful feelings were really permissible: "I love you, you love me, we're a happy family." Sesame Street, with its razzle-dazzle animation and relentless recitation of the alphabet, seeks to propel children into a video-induced trance of reading readiness, as if watching TV were really the best preparation for the written page, or listening to rap lyrics a good way to learn math. Only Mr. Rogers seemed to take time to really communicate with children, which involves listening as much as talking. As he said, "The question is not 'What can we sell the children and families who use Mister Rogers Neighborhood?' or even 'What can we give them?' but rather 'Who are they?' and 'What do they bring to the television set?'"

What kids bring are often weighty concerns. After all, being small doesn't mean you don't have big problems. Topics like divorce, and sibling rivalry, and loneliness and what it's like to have an electric wheelchair were all grist for the mill in Mister Roger's Neighborhood, addressed gently but frankly. One example is how he handled the issue of death. When one of the goldfish that Mr. Rogers fed each day was discovered dead, Fred told the children what had happened. He talked about the feelings of loss one feels when a pet or loved one dies. He buried the fish, and explained that it could always be a memory. Children may not understand endings in quite the same way we do, but the emotions are the same.

But does a fish really matter? You bet it does. My own two were each six when they acquired goldfish, won by spending their allowance tossing ping pong balls into empty fishbowls at the county fair. Despite my mutterings that living creatures shouldn't be parceled out as prizes on the midway, they insisted, and by the time we'd purchased tanks, nets, fish food and other paraphernalia, these "free prize" ended up costing me plenty. To me, the fish were mostly an annoyance and, true to my predictions, both expired after a few days despite our best efforts to keep them going and were buried in the backyard under small crosses by the clothes line. What surprised me was the way both children

seemed to ruminate about those fish for months afterward. The journals my daughter made in school were adorned with pictures of Rosie (the pet name she gave to dolls and all her favorite playmates), and in a short autobiographical essay that my son wrote almost a year later, the fish received far more ink than grandparents, Sunday School, sports, or items I would have thought more important. One evening the following spring, I found two apple blossoms laid lightly on their graves.

For me, the fish might have been a nuisance. But for my children, they were apparently symbols for Being itself: emblems of transience and transcendence for which they had neither words nor concepts but that cast a powerful spell on their mind.

It's this respect for children's inner world that made Mr. Rogers such an appealing figure. When he sang his familiar song ...

It's you I like,
It's not the things you wear ...

... you sensed his affection and reverence for every child as an expression of something more. That, I believe, is the essence of his theology, and one I share. I was too much of a hands-on parent to sentimentalize children. I wiped too many bottoms and adjudicated too many backseat arguments to idealize them. But I was also enough of a soft-hearted Dad to think that kids can be little angels, as close as we come to cradling what's holy. One holiday, for instance, I noticed that my kids had put their Christmas lists up on the refrigerator door right next to mine. My own was not especially extravagant, but rather long: warm socks, new spoons for the kitchen, a book on birds and more stuff I wanted. The children's lists were equally lengthy, but unlike mine, theirs were lists of things they wanted to give to other people, not an itemization of the goodies they hoped to receive. Now I know they didn't inherit that from me. It came from somewhere I can't explain, but have to wonder at, that I can only suppose came from God, or the Eternal, or maybe from watching so much of Mr. Rogers.

He didn't call his message preaching. "I never wanted to superimpose anything on anybody," he offered modestly. "I would like to think that I can create some sort of atmosphere that allows people to be comfortable enough to be who they are. And consequently they can grow from there." Maybe that's how the divine enters our lives, not forcing its way in from the outside, but enabling us to feel safe enough to grow into our own possibilities. One of the biggest influences on

his own growing, Rogers says, was his own mother. When he was a boy and would see terrible things in the news--wars and earthquakes and other disasters--his mom reminded him "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping," a lesson helpful to remember in times like these. Another important teacher was the professor who taught him Greek at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, where he attended classes for eight years as a part-time student while working at WQED on *The Children's Corner*, his first venture into TV ministry. The primary insight he gained from Dr. Orr was that in this life evil takes the form of the accuser, while goodness plays the role of advocate. The situation that Rogers chose to illustrate this idea resonates with me.

It was at a church service in the 1950's. Rogers was attending as a visitor, along with his wife and some friends. "We were on vacation," he explained, "and I was in the middle of my homiletics course at the time. During the sermon I kept ticking off every mistake I thought the preacher--he must have been 80 years old--was making. When this interminable sermon finally ended, I turned to my friend, intending to say something critical about the sermon. I stopped myself when I saw the tears running down her face. She whispered to me, 'He said exactly what I needed to hear.' That was really a seminal experience for me," he affirmed. "I was judging and she was needing, and the Holy Spirit responded to need, not to judgment."

It's a chastening notion. I think how often I've been critical of others rather than appreciating them for who they are. But the best part of ourselves is not the element that stands looking down. Rather it's the part that can bend, get down, even kneel, the way one naturally adjusts one's own level and hunkers down to listen to a child who wants to tell us about their day or share a concern or ask for a hug. It's from that posture of lowliness and simplicity that healing enters our lives.

The German theologian Freidrich Schleiermacher once defined religion as "the feeling of absolute dependence," and if that is true, then children are among the most deeply spiritual beings on earth. Their needs are so obvious: to be fed, sheltered, read to, tucked in and kissed at the end of the day. All of us have those tender yearnings inside ourselves, though as adults we usually put up a front of self-reliance. But it's in becoming as little children--recognizing how much we need each other--that we come closest the beloved community.

When he was invited to be the commencement speaker at Yale several years ago, Rogers encountered one of the graduates who had grown up watching public

television, who told him that Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, and especially the Land of Make-Believe, came closest to his idea of what Heaven might be like. I suppose that what keeps so many watching, the hint that, for half-an-hour daily, we might find the unconditional love and acceptance our souls so sorely need. But heaven is not merely Make-Believe. It is a real place. "The connections we make in the course of a lifetime--maybe that's what heaven is," said Mister Rogers. And he could be right.

Closing Words

It's such a good feeling to know you're alive
It's such a happy feeling you're growing inside
And when you wake up ready to say
I think I'll make a snappy new day
It's such a good feeling, a very good feeling
A feeling you know that I'll be back
When the day is new
And I'll have more ideas to share with you
You'll have things you want to talk about
I will too