

Remembering Mr. Rogers

In times of corruption to nurture is a revolutionary act. George Wolfe

A return to caring and civility—Remembering lessons learned from Mr. Rogers.

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Contexts:

It was the mid-summer of 2018 and in the swelter of the unbearable central Texas heat I found myself in a bit of a downward funk. This mood was amplified after talking to my younger brother about the state of the world and my general concerns for the devolution of human behavior. My brother lives in Howard County Maryland, a densely populated suburb situated between Baltimore, Md. and Washington, DC. Like much of the Mid-Atlantic region it is a culturally diverse area, filled mostly with a middle class population of working professionals. Indicative of so many East Coast suburbs the dense population and over-crowding provides residents with daily logistical and social challenges. Several years ago Howard County initiated a campaign to remind folks to “play nice” and started giving out bumper stickers that said simply “Choose Civility.” My brother indicated that he thought the “county-wide civility push” was working as he had recently noted a general change in folks’ attitudes and behaviors.



In light of the glaring public examples we have all been subjected to lately, I thought this was good news. However, I still harbored deep concerns over the downward trajectory in humans’ behavioral patterns and my depression continued after our conversation ended. Apparently I had made an involuntary choice to be overwhelmed by all the bad news. The endless glut of publicized ugly behaviors; the litany of mean snarks and tweets; the gross political intrigue, falsehoods, ineptitude and inaction; and the stories of the obscene wealth of the über rich in light of the rising poverty of the average working class American – it was all getting to me –big time! Like many others I found myself fed up and very frustrated.

Believing the adage that “*we are all in charge of our own attitudes*,” when I reflectively examined my mental and emotional state, I also found that in addition to listening to false news and watching notable politicians and celebrities act poorly, I was very tired of observing the abysmal prospects of a generation of badly behaved children. Many of these kids seem destined to have their childhoods dominated by negligent parents who confoundedly seem to think that shoving cell phones in their kids’ faces is some form of positive parenting. In my aged opinion overly distracted parents should get off their infernal phones and actively engage their children in positive social interactions and training. Well-modeled interpersonal abilities are learned and imprinted at very early ages and are exceptionally important skills to have, especially in a world that is becoming vastly overcrowded. Our ready access to cell phones and the related proliferation to social media seems to be robbing today’s children of their first and most powerful teachers – their parents!

It was in this really disgusted mindset that I desperately sought something to buoy up my spirits. I knew I needed a major attitude adjustment. So in looking for new perspectives, one hot Sunday afternoon I found myself seeking relief from both the oppressive heat and my own whirling negativity by venturing into the cooling embrace of a local movie house. Here I rediscovered a smiling Fred Rogers waiting for me through the bio *Won’t You Be My Neighbor*.

Remembering Mr. Rogers and why we still need his messages

I am old, and I consider myself somewhat worldly, fairly well read, and in rare delusional states I might cop to thinking I am somewhat sophisticated in my tastes. And yet I have no hesitation about unashamedly admitting to anyone, anywhere, anytime that I am a huge Mr. Rogers fan. I felt compelled to write this piece after I viewed the documentary on his life, and lots of things went through my mind. Mostly what I thought about was probably how disappointed Fred Rogers would be with the state of today's world, the deterioration of some humans' interactions, and how very concerned he would be for today's children.

Looking backwards:



Mr. Roger's Neighborhood had 895 episodes. The evolution of the format had several permutations and transitions from its beginning into the format that evolved in 1968 when it first aired on National Educational Television (or as we know it today PBS). It was broadcast and produced through WQED, Pittsburg's public TV station.

The documentary on Fred Rogers' life pointed out that the idea for the show emerged after Fred watched people throw pies at one another and laugh at rather violent, disrespectful antics. He thought that this type of behavior was not what children should be watching. So when National Educational Television (PBS) started Fred pitched a children's program where he designated themes the he wanted to address and explore. Some of these had to do with things like self-esteem and self-control, anger management, tolerance for those who were different, curiosity, creativity, diversity, kindness, persistence, and patience. And to make sure the themes and the content were fitting for children, Fred continually sought the advice of developmental child psychologists to test the age appropriateness of the scripted ideas for his young viewers.

One of the aspects of the show that Mr. Rogers decided was to bring music into the show. Children can remember simple songs and rhymes more easily and Fred was a trained musician and pianist. Having a music degree himself, for many of his shows he struck upon the idea that he could compose simple songs based on related themes so children could learn and retain the lessons inherent in his programs. One of his more remembered ones is [*What do you do with the mad that you feel?*](#) The beginning goes:

*What do you do with the mad that you feel
When you feel so mad you could bite?
When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong...
And nothing you do seems very right?*

Obviously this song is about being angry and mad. Here Mr. Rogers was telling kids he knew exactly how it felt to be extremely cross and frustrated. However, in this same song he also offered his young viewers solutions to that all-consuming anger – things they could learn to do for themselves. So the song, while recognizing anger, was empowering to kids by offering them acceptable ways to challenge and channel that emotion.

Many of [his songs](#) and episodes were about acknowledging these kinds of strong feelings, learning why they existed, but also how to understand, use, or control them. In essence Fred Rogers was not only informing his young viewers that he understood them, but he was letting them know they were not alone. At the same time he was also encouraging and enabling them to make wise choices.

Vignettes - Fred and Me – a long history

I was not fully exposed to the PBS show *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* until I had children. My house was one of those homes that acted as a neighborhood kid magnet. There was no cable TV in our town, and so PBS was a staple. One sunny day in the May 1980 in rural Oklahoma I found 6 kids, ages 2-7, sitting on the floor of my "library" watching an "opera" from the "*Neighborhood of Make Believe*." This particular episode featured none other than baritone John Reardon of the Metropolitan Opera visiting the realm of King Friday the XIII. Looking at this group of kids as they were mesmerized, I thought "*Wow this is a bit over the top -- opera on a kid's program!*" I remember thinking the lyrics were a bit silly, but the kids were certainly happily engaged. This was my introduction to the power of Fred Rogers to captivate, inspire and shape young minds. And like *Sesame Street*, and later *Reading Rainbow*, *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* became a regular destination in my house. Like other young watchers, my children learned many valuable social and life lessons from Fred Rogers, but perhaps more surprising, so did I.

Preparing for a child's hospitalization:

When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."
Fred Rogers

One of the things that the documentary on Fred pointed out was that kids are affected by lots of things which adults don't think they can understand. While parents may be naïve as to the breadth and depth of children's capacity for understanding, Mr. Rogers was not. In talking to kids about serious topics he spoke to the kids in his audience in his gentle understanding way about serious topics like death, racial harmony, understanding and accommodating folks with disabilities, and divorce. One of the topics he also tackled was being sick and going to the hospital. In fact he wrote two books about it - *Going to the Doctor (1986)*, and *Going to the hospital (1977, revised in 1997)*.

I discovered his book on going to the hospital while trying to prepare my almost three-year old daughter for open heart surgery. She was born with a condition called "[Tetralogy of Fallot](#)," which is essentially four defects in the heart affecting how it functions. There are degrees of severity with this condition. Some children need to be operated on immediately after birth, while others, with the aid of medication, can wait until they get older. The advantage in waiting means that the heart and affected blood vessels are larger and thus makes it easier for the surgeon to repair. This was the case with my youngest child. For the first three years of her life she was in controlled heart failure. A few months before her third birthday her doctors decided it was the right time to attempt repairs.

Of course my husband and I were aware of her condition almost immediately after her birth. And while we were very informed and watchful parents, one of the many things we had agreed on was we did not want her life to be less fulfilled due to her condition. Too we did not want her to be overly coddled or spoiled or afraid. And so her father and I realized that a big part of our battle was to quell our own fears and nervousness so that they would not be inadvertently transferred to our child. This was a real challenge as this kid had many trips to the hospital. Still we must have done something right because she was not afraid of doctors or hospitals. And even though there was an absence of apprehension on her part, I knew that a simple hospitalization was immensely different than one that included open heart surgery. I needed to prepare my daughter to understand and endure a prolonged hospitalization, as well as a stint in a cardiac ICU.

So my quest for advice began several months before the big surgery. I became a very driven parent on a mission to find advice and specific materials and suggestions about going to the hospital -- ones that

would make this next scary ordeal a little less daunting for all of us. This quest brought me to the offering from Fred Rogers, *Going to the hospital*. This book went through the possibilities of a stay in the hospital with pictures and possible scenarios. Here Mr. Rogers introduced young readers to medical equipment, and to the possibilities of procedures like x-rays and blood draws. The premise behind the book's sequence is kids need to be prepared and the more they know and understand about the unknown, the better prepared they are and thus less afraid. Mr. Rogers' descriptions were simple and written in a way that children could understand, and it included lots of pictures to help explain the possible scenarios.

The other thing I gathered from watching how Mr. Roger presented difficult concepts to children was he always did it in a calm, sincere, but matter-of-fact kind of way. The messages were full of caring and concern but they were also truthful. Mr. Rogers seemed to trust kids to make the best use of the information he provided. When talking to my child about her operation, I tried to mimic Fred Rogers' quiet, caring assurance.

Again, taking Mr. Rogers' lead, I also found out as much about the procedures as possible. One of the things I found out about that would happen in the ICU disturbed me. It is necessary for the children experiencing long surgeries and respiratory support to breathe deeply after surgery in order to clear their lungs. This is easy to explain to a rational adult, but often the only way it can be achieved with very small children was to make them cry. To do this the nurses would often pinch them, not out of cruelty but they just needed to have the patient clear his or her lungs and deep breathe so as not to get post-operative pneumonia. Not being happy about this and using Rogers' *Neighborhood of Make Believe* for inspiration, I struck upon the idea of getting a puppet and training my daughter to deep breathe when she saw it. So we purchased a cute dragon sock puppet at a local bookstore and proceeded to practice deep breathing on cue. It worked like a charm. And I also taught my daughter how to use meditation-like techniques to push her pain or fear away.

This tale has many other layers and permutations; perhaps it is enough to say here that this little girl just celebrated her 40th birthday. She is a healthy, happy, and productive adult. Thanks in part to Fred Rogers' many fine examples, she is also extremely considerate, thoughtful, and very socially adept.

I can conclude this part of my homage to Mr. Rogers by saying that due to some of Mr. Rogers' suggestions the nursing staff was so taken with my child's behavior and responses they asked me to write a detailed listing of all the things I did to prepare her for surgery. I of course gave Mr. Roger's credit where due and part of the incentive in writing this piece is it is long overdue and posthumous "thank you" to him for not only his book, but also for his example.

Fred Rogers and the pole vaulter – continued inspiration:

Parents are like shuttles on a loom. They join the threads of the past with threads of the future and leave their own bright patterns as they go.
Fred Rogers

About five years after the events above I found myself at my elder daughter's track meet. Waiting for her event we watched the end elimination in a tight pole vaulting competition in the senior division. It had just concluded when the winner, a very tall high school senior, exited the stadium ramp and stopped in front of me. I did not know him, but extended my hand offering congratulations. It turned out that the reason he stopped was my T- shirt. It was one from the PBS catalog and emblazoned on the front was a picture of Mr. Rogers' trolley -- the one used to transport viewers into the neighborhood of make-believe. Grinning wide he thanked me, but then said. "That's a great shirt! Where did you get it?"

I explained that my kids watched the show and the shirt it was one of thank you gifts from the local PBS fund-raiser event. To my surprise the young man continued the conversation telling me he had just finished his final sociology paper. Writing about those people who had most influenced him and who he wanted to be like this young man had concentrated his paper on two role models - his dad and Mr. Rogers.



When I expressed my surprise at the Mr. Rogers part, this young athlete seemed eager to proudly reiterate aspects of his paper. Despite the hubbub around us he seemed determined to tell me why these two men were so important to him. It was one of those surprisingly deep conversations with a total stranger the cosmos sometimes sends our way.

He indicated both his dad and Mr. Rogers:

- Exuded both gentleness and a quiet strength;
- Were extremely patient, kind and understanding;
- Interested in what kids thought;
- Were impressively multitalented
- Stood up for serious issues and important causes, but still had keen senses of humor and were fun to be around.

All of these were attributes he wanted to emulate. Finally this young man indicated that specifically because of Mr. Rogers he looked at folks who were different than he was in new ways and with more understanding. He ended his summation with, "*You know Mr. Rogers is an ordained minister, but there is nothing preachy about him!*" I knew he was an accomplished musician but not an ordained Presbyterian minister.

One of his fellow vaulters approached indicating it was time to go to the podium for awards. I ended this encounter expressing my deep appreciation for our chat and the information he had shared. I would remember this conversation in years to come, especially as I thought about how young lives, values and future behaviors are shaped and formed by the media they are exposed to, as well as by the examples from the adults around them. In fact in later years as a professor of education teaching a graduate class in curriculum and instructional design, I would use this occurrence to illustrate how media, also known as the [phantom curriculum](#), could strongly shape children in ways of which we are often unaware.

As an adult I have always been surprised at the mismatch of how kids and grownups look at things differently. On the surface this young man appeared to be a typical high school athlete -- tall, robust, jovial, well-spoken, one who appeared popular with his peers. And yet here he was unashamedly and with great humility pinpointing the host of a kid's program as one of his quintessential role models with traits he wanted to imitate as he carved out his vision of his future self.

Several years after this event, Daniel Goleman wrote a surprise, runaway best seller, *Emotional Intelligence* (1995). In it he heralded both the need for and ways to acquire social and emotional understanding and skills. Well in advance of this work and almost prophetically, my young pole vaulter had seen aspects of these intelligences deeply rooted in two men he wanted to mimic. I often wondered what happened to the young athlete as he seemed so much wiser than his years.

Saying goodbye to Mr. Rogers – more revelations:

Knowing that we can be loved exactly as we are gives us all the best opportunity for growing into the healthiest of people.
Fred Rogers

It was 1990 when I became a professor of education in the University of Wisconsin System. One of the first things I requested between the hall wall space between my office door and my neighbors' was a small bulletin board. It was the only personal bulletin board in long expanse of empty hallway. I included things on it I thought would be of interest to, or would amuse, my undergraduate students as they waited in the halls for professors' office hours or appointments.

On a large cup hook next to the board I hung a small open wicker basket – I called it my *wisdom basket*. I included colorful folded slips of paper containing quotes I valued. These were switched out frequently with a caption to take one and pass it on. The basket became a hit, even with the staff, and many folks would take daily inspiration from the basket much like diners in Asian restaurants look forward to reading the notes folded in fortune cookies. It was my way of passing on the works and words of people who were famous, both real and fictional.

On February 27th 2003, right before his 75th birthday, Fred Rogers passed away from stomach cancer. When he died, I placed a copy of his obituary on my hall bulletin board. The caption read ***“Saying goodbye to our dear friend Mr. Rogers.”*** The wisdom basket was filled with quotes from his show and from Fred's books. The intensity of what happened afterwards surprised me.

Much like the cramped dorm rooms at public universities, professional offices were tight. I tend to suffer from claustrophobia so if I was in my office the door was usually open a crack. My desk and chair were hidden behind a bookshelf I had arranged as a partition. This allowed me to hear students as they knocked or approached, but the arrangement also gave me some suggestion of privacy as I worked.

Shortly after Fred Rogers died we had pre-registration advising. The halls were periodically filled with lots of students waiting for appointments. Over a three week period many students would stop and read the posted obituary. Many dipped into my basket of quotes and I could hear or see some of the students reading their retrieved slips of paper aloud to one another, often recounting memories of particular favorite episodes of the show. Others would launch into personal narratives about how this man had affected their young lives or their understanding of certain issues.

As they were recounting their personal stories and their memories about how Mr. Rogers had taught them this or that, their comments were endlessly positive, in many cases deeply reverential, or even quite emotional. And yes, for the most part I was in fact eavesdropping on personal journeys and revelations. I suppose I should feel guilty about this intrusion, but my door was clearly open. Many of my advisees carried their grief and reminiscences into their appointments with me so we also discussed their recollections of Mr. Rogers. The whole experience was both very revealing and inspiring on many levels.

To some degree I knew Mr. Rogers had affected my children's development and their interactions with others. What I did not realize was the pervasive potency to which he positively influenced a much broader population of American children. The same level of genuine affection and awe that projected from my students also came through from his young viewers as captured in the documentary on his life.

Remembering Mr. Rogers – Endings Comments

Children learn a great deal from observing other people. Neurologists have discovered that humans have [mirror neurons](#) that direct imitative behaviors. This is why modeled conduct and actions are so very, very important to young children. As an educator knowing this I have grave concerns for today's and tomorrow's children over the current intensity of exposure to really negative role models, especially those in the media.

Currently, American adults seem fascinated and amused by the antics of reality show stars, many of whom act like vulgar, shrewish fishwives, or crass, petulant, spoiled bullies. In my mind our collective fascination with these shows and the cult worship of their stars is not only pretty sickening, but also dangerous as we are inadvertently exposing our children to these types of "role models." The degree to which fallout from these shows is leaching into the fabric of our social interactions is nothing short of catastrophic. I must ask, *Is this really what we want our society to become? Is this really the way we want our children to learn to behave?*

One of the things that radically marked Mr. Rogers from adults in general is he seemed to respect children's intellect and their inherent sense of right and wrong. Positive role models help children develop social patterns that turn into lifelong values, reactions, and behaviors. Fred Rogers knew this, but others seem to be forgetting it.

In conclusion, while I will undoubtedly continue to listen and watch world news and cringe at the endless examples of the worst in human behavior, I have made myself a vow. If I feel myself spiraling downward again, slipping over the edge into doom and gloom, I am going to try to remember Mr. Rogers, his songs and his messages. I will also try to remember this quote from him - ***There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.*** Like Mr. Rogers and his legacy I need to remember that I can make those ones that are positive. I can leave with others memories of kindness, understanding, and simple consideration. After all it is about my individual force of will – and I too can choose civility and caring.



Mr. Rogers' sweater at the Smithsonian. He interchanged about 2 dozen sweaters – all of them were knitted by his mother.

More to Listen to and Watch:

- [Anthony Breznican](#) - writer and tweeter in a skyped interview on PBS News as he remembers Mr. Rogers after hearing about the Manchester bombing. May 26, 2019 PBS
- *A simple thing called life* – [8 facts about Mr. Rogers.](#)
- [Lyrics to What do you do with the mad that you feel?](#)
- [Fred Rogers Productions.Org](#)
- [The Fred Rogers Center](#)
- The [Today Show](#): Fred Roger's widow, Joanne Rogers, and the producer of *Won't you be my neighbor?* Nicholas Ma reflects on the man and the show with Megyn Kelly on Today, June 12, 2018.

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