

# “A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood”

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During the 1997 Emmy Awards,  
as he took the stage to receive the Lifetime Achievement Award, Fred Rogers—  
forever “Mister Rogers” to some three generations of us—did the unthinkable.<sup>1</sup>

“. . . there, in front of all the soap opera stars and talk show [hosts],  
in front of all the jutting tanned jaws and [surgically altered bodies],  
he made his small bow and said into the microphone,

“All of us have special ones who have loved us into being.

Would you just take, along with me, ten seconds  
to think of the people who have helped you become who you are.  
Ten seconds of silence.”

Now, ten seconds of quiet meditation on live television is unheard of.

It’s disastrous for ratings.  
It makes sponsors squirm.  
It begs viewers to switch channels.  
People lose their job for this kind of thing!  
And everyone sitting in that audience knew that.

“And then [Mister Rogers] lifted his wrist,  
looked at the audience,  
looked at his watch, and said,  
‘I’ll watch the time.’”

“There was, at first, a small whoop from the crowd,  
a giddy, strangled hiccup of laughter,  
as people realized that he wasn’t kidding,  
that Mister Rogers was not some convenient eunuch, but rather a man,  
an authority figure who actually expected them to do what he asked.

“And so they did.

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the stories conveyed and quoted here come from Tom Junod’s article “Can You Say . . . Hero?” in *Esquire Magazine*, September 1998.

“One second, two seconds, three seconds—  
and [then] the jaws unclenched,  
and the bosoms heaved, and the mascara ran,  
and the tears fell upon the beglittered gathering  
like rain leaking down a crystal chandelier.

“And Mister Rogers finally looked up from his watch and said softly,  
‘May God be with you,’ to all his... children.

As the camera panned over the widespread weeping in the audience,  
it was clear Mister Rogers had struck a deep and meaningful chord.

As a child of the 70s, Mister Rogers has always been a part of my life.

When pressed to think about those who have given shape to my life  
and deeply influenced my call to ministry,  
Mister Rogers ranks around the top of the list.

Though we never met,  
he was and remains for me a mentor, a humble guide  
challenging me to become the person and the minister I most aspire to be.

Now, admittedly, the host of a slow-paced children’s television programme  
might seem an odd choice of mentor and spiritual guide,  
especially since he’s been gone for almost twenty years.

In life, he was often the butt of jokes—  
most famously, those hilarious *Saturday Night Live* skits in the mid-80s.

It was easy to poke fun at the slow, measured cadence of his voice,  
his nerdy sneakers and hokey lyrics,  
and those signature cardigan sweaters,  
hand-knitted over the years by both his mother and his wife.

He was hopelessly un-hip.

But he was authentic, and he was true to his calling  
to create a world better than the one he knew.

To do that, he gave over his life to shaping the lives of children—  
and he never looked back.

The programme he created here in Toronto in the early 1960s for the CBC  
would eventually go on to become *Mister Roger’s Neighbourhood*

and give rise to Canada's own *Mr. Dressup*.

Mister Rogers was a progressive pioneer in a movement that transformed the role of television in the education of children.

By speaking directly and respectfully to children,  
he plainly translated the difficult topics of death and divorce,  
intolerance and war,  
for generations of children  
growing up in a bewildering world.

I am grateful to have been one of those children.

From him I learned lessons at home that simply weren't available to me when the television was turned off.

In his gentle way, he taught three generations that,  
"Feelings are 'mentionable,'  
and [that] whatever is 'mentionable' can be more manageable."

He invited us to name our fears.  
He taught us that we were special just by being ourselves.

He held up for us a kaleidoscopic view of the world around us,  
helping us to see the beauty of life's diversity.

And he instilled in us a sense of awe by showing us how crayons are made  
and how telescopes gaze into the heavens.

But, perhaps, most significantly,  
he reminded the adults around us that children must be loved,  
and cherished, and respected if they are to become healthy adults.

On the surface, his approach may seem ridiculously outmatched  
by the times in which we live.

But I don't think so.

There are lessons to be learned from anyone  
led by an indomitable will to make a genuine difference.

That he did—and does—day after day, and even now in reruns,  
deserves our attention.

Describing his subtle but surprising strength, Tom Junod, the reporter depicted in the 2019 film “A Beautiful Day in the Neighbourhood,” starring Tom Hanks as Mister Rogers, put it this way:

Here is the secret of Mister Rogers:

He says exactly what he means and exactly what is true, and he says it for the consumption of a single, simple audience: children.

He does so without regard to adult opinion of how old-fashioned his simplicity makes him appear.

He is so committed to kids that he spends no time adjusting his performance to affect his profile in the popular culture of adults. He needs no posturing, no sly winks to the grownups that [acknowledge] he knows how silly he must look.

If you're over the age of ten, he doesn't really care what you think of him.

And that's real power.  
Fred Rogers is a supremely confident man.

Far from Pollyanna naïveté, his simple message continues to hold out hope against the fundamental problem that humanity has struggled with for so long and which so much of religion strives to address: the illusion of our separateness from one another.

The lessons transmitted from Mister Rogers' Neighbourhood time and again pointed to the sacred bonds that bind our lives one to another.

In a vivid way—in Technicolor, no less—Mister Rogers spent four decades probing that timeless Biblical question of whom we are to regard as our neighbour.

His answer, of course, was everyone.

In his 2001 commencement address to the graduating class of Middlebury College, Mister Rogers shared with the students that,

“For a long time [he] wondered why

[he] felt like bowing when people showed their appreciation for the work that [he'd] been privileged to do.”

He explained, “What I’ve come to understand is that we who bow are probably—whether we know it or not—acknowledging the presence of the eternal in our neighbour.”

“You see,” he said, “I believe that appreciation is a holy thing. . . [and to] appreciat[e] the eternal in our neighbour, is to participate in something that is truly sacred.”<sup>2</sup>

Mister Rogers, was an ordained Presbyterian minister,  
a televangelist of sorts,  
who did bring something of the sacred to my childhood.

I will always be grateful for having grown up in his neighbourhood.

On a road-trip last spring,  
I stopped by the Fred Rogers Centre in Latrobe, Pennsylvania,  
a suburb of Pittsburgh, and the small city where Fred lived most of his life.

I’ll admit to getting weepy at seeing his cardigans, his worn-out sneakers,  
and the very puppets that animated my younger years.

And as silly as I might have felt with tears rolling down my cheeks,  
there in the small museum honouring his work, I wasn’t alone.

Indeed, tears tell truths often beyond the reach of words.

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I now find myself at an age and in a role  
where I bear a great responsibility to transform my deep appreciation  
for the teachers and mentors who’ve guided me along the way  
into meaningful action that serves others.

It’s not too strong to say that I feel a deep sense of obligation.

“To whom much is given, much is expected,” after all.

But, more than mere obligation,  
I’ve come to see this as the sacred trust at the heart of life—

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<sup>2</sup> From “Moving on, by degree” in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 12 June 2001.  
<https://www.csmonitor.com/2001/0612/p16s1.html>

the sacred trust of which I so often speak  
and that I referenced just last week,  
when I described the feeling of deep gratitude  
for the trees we did not plant and the wells we did not dig,  
and our responsibility, in our time, to do some digging and planting of our own.

In doing this, we remind ourselves that our lives are not entirely our own—  
and that we have obligations to those who've gone before, and those who will  
follow after.

Speaking to this responsibility between generations,  
our own Ralph Waldo Emerson reminded us that:

We are not born free, we are born with a mortgage.  
That mortgage is a debt, a debt that we owe to the past and to the future.  
While we live we pay interest and then pass it on to the next generation.<sup>3</sup>

That's how churches, communities, and nations survive" he added;  
"by accepting what has been bequeathed  
and passing it on to those that come after them."

The rich heritage of Unitarianism comes to us with an enormous price tag.  
As it turns out, what we proudly call our "free faith" isn't exactly free after all.

While liberty remains, of course, our faith demands a measure of our devotion.

It is a debt of gratitude we are called to repay, at least in part,  
by investing in the future of our faith,  
by giving of ourselves—with our hands and hearts—  
to build up this beloved community of memory and hope,  
both now and for years to come.

Which brings us back to children.

As Gabriela Mistral suggests, there is a certain urgency that children bring with  
them.

She says:

Many things we need can wait. The child cannot.  
Now is the time [their] bones are being formed;  
[Their] blood is being made; [their] mind is being developed.

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Gilbert, *How Much Do We Deserve: An Inquiry into Distributive Justice*, Red Wheel/Wieser, 2001, p. 81.

To [them] we cannot say tomorrow. [For their] name is today.

The African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child has grown pretty thin by overuse.

But, here at First, we might put this proverb another way, echoing the words of Maria Harris, which Angela shared earlier: “Everything we do is religious education.” And “the congregation in the curriculum.”

So much of what our children will come to know of Unitarian Universalism will be from the words of our mouths, the work of our hands, and the state of our hearts.

So we would do well to give thought to our ways of being, here and elsewhere.

We would do well to consider the role of children in our lives, here and beyond these walls, and whether we know them personally or not.

I’m inviting you to think about your own growth, and the arc of your own spiritual exploration over time.

I’m asking that you allow yourself to be stopped dead in your tracks, right there in Aisle Five by the wonder of a child,<sup>4</sup> and in such moments to find the sacred bridge that connects you—to them, to yourself, to everything that has been and will ever be.

To help you get there, I will simply remind you that: “All of us have special ones who have loved us into being.” And encourage you to spend your days loving others into being, in return, be they children, or those who were once children, which includes us all.

In the meantime, though, I now ask, if you would, to just take, along with me, “ten seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are.”

Don’t worry, I’ll watch the time. . .

May we give of our lives in gratitude for all that has been given to us.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Reference to the poem “Coconut” by Paul Hostovsky, which was read prior to the sermon. [http://www.paulhostovsky.com/publications\\_birdinhand\\_twa.html](http://www.paulhostovsky.com/publications_birdinhand_twa.html)