

Won't You Be My Neighbour
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It's a question that is both current and ancient. It is a question that matters as much now as it ever has. Mister Rogers made a television series about it, Mister Roger's Neighborhood – for 31 seasons. Many of us can hear the familiar tune:

"Won't you be my neighbour?" It sounds like a child's invitation but notice what he's really asking. If Mr. Rogers were only thinking about neighbours as the people who lived near to us, he wouldn't need to ask the question. If he was only thinking about those who live near, the meaning of neighbour would be simple... the ones who live nearby. But he is asking a bigger question. "Won't you be My Neighbour?", the question is an invitation to be in relationship. And if being a neighbour is about relationship, and not something that is dictated by proximity, then being neighbours is a choice.

The word neighbour comes from Middle English and before that, the Old English *neahgebur* meaning "one who dwells nearby" This Old English term is a compound of *Neigh* for near, or *nigh*, and *gebur* which meant dweller. So at its root the word describes someone who lives close. But in a quick review of religious texts, we find the larger concept. And a bit of digging illustrates that the English word "neighbour" is much younger than the moral idea it sometimes expresses. Again, in the original meaning of the word we use, a neighbour was simply "the person who lives nearby." It described geography, not ethics. But when we consider ethics, nearness looks different. Over many centuries, different religious traditions took similar words meaning "one who is near" and transformed them into an ethical concept.

Long before the English word came into use, the question of 'who is near' was explored in most religious traditions.

In Judaism, in Leviticus 19, there is a passage, almost lost among some of the verses I find problematic, that reads, "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as one of you. Love them as yourself." The teachings of Jesus, including in the Good Samaritan passage I read earlier reinforces this teaching. Islam teaches that our kindness to others is a form of worship, and those deserving our kindness? The list includes the obvious, parents, and relatives, but it also includes distant neighbours and travelers... Hinduism asserts the guest is like God, and in Sikh communities there is a practice of *langar*, offering a free community meal where everyone sits together regardless of wealth, caste, religion, or status. Indigenous teaching reminds us that the circle of care is wide, and includes the natural world, our ancestors and future generations. Religious tradition encourages

us to understand neighbourliness through relationships, close and not so close. Neighbourliness becomes something enacted, not merely believed.

In the translation from the original texts into English, we've landed on the word neighbour. The ethical question then becomes do we use the definition that refers to proximity, or do we use the larger definition. The question is not merely ancient. It is very much alive. Every generation must decide whether neighbour means only those who are close to us, familiar to us, or useful to us. We see that question playing out today in debates about immigration, refugees, foreign aid, and humanitarian responsibility. Many religious leaders have argued that policies emphasizing border enforcement, deportation, and reductions in refugee admissions give insufficient weight to our obligations toward strangers and vulnerable people. Others emphasize the responsibilities of governments to maintain order and security. Beneath these policy debates lies an older moral question: How wide is the circle of our concern? We can hide behind the geographic closeness found in the root of the English word, or we can accept the challenge found in ancient and modern wisdom.

Don't get me wrong, I know this is, at least some of the time, a tall order. Being a neighbour, living into neighbourliness, is frequently inconvenient. At the basic level the inconvenience looks like a disruption to our plans, our routines. I'm, at least at times, introverted. Some days my peopling quota has been reached, and the last thing I want to do, when coming home after running an errand or on my evening walk is talk to other people. We have a next-door neighbour, a great guy, you often see him cutting the lawns of others, or something similar. And he is chatty! Very chatty. I can't fault him; he really is a great guy. But sometimes, I confess, I sneak into the house, avoiding eye contact, because I don't want to chat. I don't want to put myself out. And to some degree that is fair – it might be the neighbourhood equivalent of putting on your own oxygen mask first. After all, if I don't take care of myself, my ability to be in relationship with others is in danger of being compromised. But I sometimes wonder, am I using that as an excuse? Honestly? Sometimes I am. Because if I could I'd avoid the discomfort and inconvenience that comes with political disagreements, the learning curve that comes as I navigate differences, the fear of the unknown. I don't like the hard truths that the world offers up and so wish they weren't there. I'm busy, I've got things to do. It's easier to let the algorithm feed me ideas that resonate with my own, and to avoid engaging with people who think differently. I've 'unfriended' people because their posts made me too sad, or too angry, or too uncomfortable. And, as I say, I sometimes justify that as self-care. Sometimes it is, and sometimes, I avoid others because it is easier. And in doing so, I sidestep the cultural imperative to widen my understanding, of being in relationship with the stranger – in all the ways we might understand that concept.

For Unitarian Universalists, who affirm the ideas of inherent worth and dignity, interdependence and a commitment to dismantling barriers, the call to understand neighbour in its larger sense is clear. Our fundamental understanding is that all are connected. That understanding teaches us that what affects one, affects all. Our neighbourhood is a very large one, and that leads us to a larger question, bigger than 'who deserves my care?', to 'how will I choose to be?' We ask the larger question, 'how will I choose to be?', because neighbour, fundamentally about relationship, is best understood as a verb. And the challenge of this ethical understanding of neighbour is not merely identifying neighbours but accepting the inconvenience of neighbourliness. Being a neighbour asks something of us, it asks us to pay attention to others, knowing they are neighbours. Being a neighbour means we allow ourselves to be interrupted, by the person who lives on the street, who wants to talk, or the news we read in the morning. Our plans, and our comfort are, sometimes disrupted. Sometimes being a neighbour means we risk discomfort, finding ourselves in an unfamiliar situation, doing things outside of our comfort zone. Living as a neighbour, means we see another's humanity before deciding whether they deserve our help, and it reminds us that neighbours aren't simply people who live nearby, but sometimes they are on the other side of the world.

Our congregations are collections of people. We like to say we are here because of common beliefs. But are we? It is a bit of a stretch to make the assertion that all Unitarian Universalists hold the same beliefs. Some of you believe in God, others, very emphatically do not. What we do have in common, is our principles, ideas we aspire to, that help us navigate the world. We are neighbours here, but not because we all believe the same things about God, or what happens after we die... but because we do affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person. We strive to build beloved community here, and that doesn't require agreement, but it does require commitment. Sure, some of us are impatient, or cranky, or hold different views on politics or sports teams. But we are committed – to the idea that we can choose connection across difference. We disagree, we have misunderstandings, we hurt one another, and yet we are committed to holding one another in neighbourly regard. No doubt it is easier here than it is in some settings, because our principles provide us with a sympathetic framework for navigating the world, and that makes them excellent practice grounds for the wider world.

Fred Rogers understood his show, as a practice ground, as an illustration of what a neighbour really was. One of the characters on the show, Francois Clemmons, a black man, who played the role of a neighbourhood police officer. In 1969, Rogers aired an episode, in which he and Clemmons, sat side-by-side in folding chairs, with their bare feet soaking in a children's wading pool – as relief from the hot day. Consider what a remarkable thing this was in 1969, when there are still current news stories about police

calls related to people of colour in public pools. In another episode Rogers featured Jeff Erlanger, a young boy who used a power wheelchair. Rogers spoke with him naturally and respectfully, asking about his life rather than treating him as an object of pity. In his quiet way, Mr. Rogers was challenging the understanding of neighbour – we don't have to be the same to be neighbours. In 1963, after more than 10 years in television he graduated from seminary and was ordained by the Presbytery of Pittsburgh at Third Presbyterian Church with the unusual charge to do his ministry with children and their families through the mass media. It was about this time that he began his on-air work in the role of Mister Rogers. While he never served in the common role of minister of a brick-and-mortar congregation, his ministry to children reached millions of children and adults. When our children were young, I found myself watching a few episodes of Mister Rogers... I found it slow moving and a bit corny, it was also charming, respectful and reflective. I confess I appreciate it more in hindsight than I did as a busy parent of two young children. Now I see Roger's theology and ministry. He affirmed, again, "I like you just the way you are", and "You have made this day a special day by just your being you." Rogers was building his theology into each episode. Every person is important. Every person is worthy of our attention. Every person deserves respect. Rogers understood the relationships between people, between neighbours, as sacred, saying in one interview, "the space between our mouths and the people who receive our offering, our mouth and their ears or eyes, is holy ground".

How could a similar understanding make a difference for us? Would our relationship with the person serving our coffee, disagreeing with us on social media, standing in line at the store – or anywhere else change if we saw the space amongst and between us as sacred – worthy of special care and attention. How might we be changed if we carried that perspective with us in the coming days and weeks. It might not leave you wanting to have coffee or a meal with every person you met, but it would certainly require you to be attentive and respectful; to slow down enough to really consider them as an individual. Maggie Helwig, who served as the Priest of the Anglican Congregation, St. Stephen's in the Field, during a prolonged encampment time, reflected in her recent book, of a time when she passed a bedraggled pan-handler, and found herself wondering, "What if that is Jesus?". It is in that kind of openness, that willingness to see the neighbour in each individual, that we are changed, and perhaps that the world is changed. That perspective changes us, because it asks something of us, Helwig, navigating the spaces between her worried and angry neighbours and the growing community in the church yard, observed, "Being afraid of something that's deeply unfamiliar to you is very natural. It can be hard to separate the feeling of being afraid from understanding whether or not you're actually threatened." That discernment is critical if we are to ask the truly important question. Fred Rogers asked, "Won't you be my neighbour?" That is a good question, but the better one, is, perhaps, "Can I be your neighbour?"

Every day we cross invisible property lines—not just between houses, but between lives.

Every day we have a choice.

We can hurry past.

We can retreat into those who already agree with us.

We can let fear decide who belongs.

Or we can widen the circle just a little.

Fred Rogers asked,

"Won't you be my neighbour?"

Perhaps the more searching question is the one we ask ourselves every morning:

Can I be your neighbour?

May our answer tomorrow be a little larger than it was yesterday.

Amen.

Let us take a few deep breaths in silent reflection