

# Wasn't It Nice in the NEIGHBORHOOD?

## Fond Memories of Fred Rogers

*The following article is reprinted from the May 2003 Visual Parables in which I held forth on Fred Rogers following his untimely death. I'm posting it here because a new book by Michael G. Long, [Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers](#), has just been published. The book argues that he was far more countercultural than his gentle demeanor would suggest. The excellent review can be found at [The Christian Post](#).*

*I mentioned in the last issue that while serving a church near Pittsburgh during the 70's I interviewed Fred Rogers several times for various magazines. Even some of my children got into the act, as you will see below. This article calls those incidents to fond remembrance and constitutes my tribute to a gentle man who meant much to my family and to thousands of others.*

The death of Fred McFeely Rogers at the age of 74 late in February left many with a mixture of sadness and thankfulness. Sad in that children lost a good friend and advocate; thankfulness in that for so many years he was such an important presence in their lives. I know this was the case with the five children my wife Sandra and I were blessed with. During their growing up years in the late 60's and 70's the two best programs on television for children were *Mister Roger's Neighborhood* and *Captain Kangaroo*. The Captain and his crazy crew provided much nourishment for the mind—each program filled with information about history and how things work—in digestible chunks that children could handle. Fred Rogers, although feeding the mind also, focused more on the spirit and

the emotions, dealing with such early childhood fears as falling down the drain of a toilet or bathtub; going to the dentist or the doctor for the first time; feelings over the death of a pet; and much more. He did this without ever talking down to children or making them feel dumb or unimportant. Thus, when in the late 70's I was an associate minister in a Pittsburgh suburb and was writing about media for the Catholic *Marriage & Family Living Magazine*, I jumped at the opportunity to interview the piped piper of TV for feature articles.

The arrangements for my first interview at the studios of WQED, where Rogers' Family Communications was headquartered, were made through David Newell. He served as the liaison with the public as well as playing Speedy Delivery McFeely, the constantly rushed deliveryman of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*. Meeting me at the reception desk, David explained that since we had conversed over the telephone Fred had agreed to meet with a grandmother and two little boys. If I did not mind letting them go first, I could observe. This turned out to be serendipitous, as I witnessed Fred Rogers in action off camera. The little boy, from San Diego, was in town visiting his grandmother. When she asked what he would most like to do, he replied that he had heard that his "TV friend, Mr. Rogers" lived in Pittsburgh and that he would love to meet him. Not really expecting to be able to do so, the lady had called to see if it were possible, and was told to come down to the studio. A neighbor's boy, and friend to her grandson, also came along.

The two little boys, not over four or five years old, were, of course, speechless in front of their idol. The grandmother tried to get the boys to say something, but Fred told her not to worry. He held out the three puppets he had brought along for such an occurrence. He suggested to the tongue-tied boys that they let their puppet friends do the talking. As each of the boys took a puppet their faces lit up, both recognizing

the puppets instantly, King Friday, Lady Elaine Fairchilde, and Daniel the Tiger. Immediately the three "puppets" were chatting back and forth, the two manipulated by the boys sharing all sorts of information about themselves and their families.

The three visitors left, young and old delighted by the meeting. Fred, apologizing for the delay, questioned me for a while about my family and career before I could get in my questions. He was very interested that I was a parent and a pastor/Christian educator. When I commented how deftly he handled the situation of the mute boys, he explained that their reaction was not unusual—that sometimes a very young child was surprised at his full size, expecting him instead to be small so that he could fit into the TV box. Glancing back through the years, he spoke of how when he was a music major in college he had intended to go into the ministry. However, when he saw an appalling children's television show, one of those "Uncle" hosts who talked down to "the kiddies" in a sing-songy voice, he was inspired to go into television. He worked during the early 1950's at the NBC studios in New York in various jobs, including as assistant producer for *The Voice of Firestone*, floor director for *The Lucky Strike Hit Parade*, *The Kate Smith Hour*, and the *NBC Opera Theatre*. His proudest achievement was with the latter, he told me, in that he was responsible for bringing the opera "Amahl and the Night Visitors" to television, a work that was so popular that it became an annual NBC event for a couple of decades or more.

In 1953 Fred Rogers accepted the invitation of WQED to come to Pittsburgh to help the fledgling station with its programming. Not yet on the air, the station was the first public education station in the nation. He began "Children's Corner," with the princely budget for production costs of \$30 an episode. During those years he worked behind the camera, writing scripts and developing and voicing some of the puppet characters that later became so well known. His desire to enter the ministry

resurfaced, and Rogers entered Pittsburgh Theological Seminary while continuing his television work. Later he also studied child psychology with leading psychologists at the University of Pittsburgh. When presented for ordination in 1962, the Presbytery of Pittsburgh had the wisdom to ordain him to the special ministry of working with children through television, an unusual step then, as the rules required candidates for ordination to be called to minister to a congregation or other church-related calling, such as a chaplaincy.

—

*1. Fred goes over a script. 2 & 3. Fred's visit at Chautauqua Institute was sponsored by MS Magazine.*

We can thank the Canadians for bringing Mister Rogers from behind the camera. Not long after his ordination, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1963 invited him up to Toronto to begin a children's program. A producer realized that Rogers could be as effective in front of the camera as behind it, and Fred complied with his request. The fifteen-minute program was named *Misterogers*. In 1965 Rogers returned to WQED, and *Misterogers* became *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*. Through the years the program expanded its audience, from that of a regionally produced show to one that was picked up by PBS stations all over the country, thus reaching millions of children.

A year or two after my first visit I was scheduled to write another article. Our daughter Ellen asked if she could go along. She was a teenager, but had fond memories of watching Mister Rogers. Although a math test was due that day, she assured me that it could be rescheduled. Of course, Fred spent the first twenty minutes or so interviewing Ellen, delighting that they shared a common interest in origami. She promised to send him a pattern for a jumping frog, which he wanted to use with a group of prisoners whom he taught regularly at a nearby prison. Later he sent her a note thanking her for the pattern

and expressing his hope that she did well on her math test (he was great for remembering such personal details!).

When I next visited WQED for an interview, my two youngest sons, Dan and Paul, then in grade school and not wanting to be outdone by their older sister, asked if they could go along to meet him. Fred was in the midst of taping a show—Bob Keeshan (Captain Kangaroo) was on the set to celebrate Fred's twenty-five years of broadcasting—far from being rivals, each honored the other's work with children, based on a love and respect for their young viewers. In between takes, while the lights were being adjusted, Fred met with us, again taking time to get to know my boys. To their surprised delight he asked if we would be willing to be "customers" on the set of a music store, a scene to be shot next. Mister Rogers would be explaining some of the musical instruments for young viewers in this scene. And so for the next half hour we pretended to be busy looking at the glass cases containing various instruments for sale. We never were able to catch that particular episode, but we like to think that somewhere out there we can be seen in the background of the program that featured the two favorite personalities of our children in their early childhood years. This time Fred Rogers sent a note thanking *me* for coming down, and he asked by name how the boys were doing.

My next encounter, the same year, 1979, included but a brief face to face exchange of greetings, but involved considerable preparation time. The Synod of the Trinity, an ecclesiastical body of the Presbyterian Church that embraced churches in Pennsylvania, West Virginia and a small portion of Ohio, wanted to honor its most famous clergyman at its annual meeting. 1979 was not only Rogers' twenty-fifth anniversary in broadcasting, it was also the "Year of the Child." My job was to prepare a slide presentation of children to go along with the evening ceremony and with talks of various children advocates the next day. A two hundred voice children's choir

(including our youngest son Dan) sang, their accompanist being none other than Joanne Byrd Rogers, Fred's wife. (They had been college classmates and married in 1952, she continuing her concert career off and on.)

Fred responded to the children's music with a delightful introduction by his puppets King Friday and Daniel the Tiger. Then he reminded the audience that once we learn that we are liked, we need not be shy. "For some reason many of us get the word that we are not loveable at all—so some of us take beauty courses, and we try desperately to win contests, and we plead, 'Make *me* lovely, too!' But it's a mistake to think that we have to be lovely to be loved by God. The function of the church is to help us—children and adults—to realize who we are and what we can become, which, of course, means that the function of the church is loving..." Showing how we need one another and can touch one another in the church, Fred shared a letter from the parents of a young viewer thanking him for his ministry: "Jessica died this evening, and her last conscious act was to switch the TV so that she could watch 'My friend, Mr. Rogers, who loves me.'"

"I wonder," he continued, "if little Jessica knew what her trust would mean to me? Her sensitive parents must have known. They took the time even in the midst of their grief to tell me...Sometimes it is the small things of a letter or a few words said by one person to another in the midst of the church that expresses best the church' function as a loving and caring community. I want to thank you for all you share with me." He closed by singing to and with the children, "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..."

As if this wasn't highlight enough, next came Ginny Thornburgh, a Presbyterian and wife of the Governor of Pennsylvania, to present Fred a special clergy stole embroidered with figures from *Mister Rogers Neighborhood*. In her own remarks Mrs. Thornburgh thanked Fred for what his

program contributed to the life of her nineteen year-old mentally-challenged son, and how it had helped her to see him as a gift from God, not a burden. This was followed by the official resolution of commendation from the Synod and Synodical (women's association).

My last face-to-face meeting also allowed but a few brief moments to exchange greetings and catch up, as it was during a special week at Chautauqua Institution in western New York. At that time, in the latter half of the 1980's I was serving a nearby church and was covering for *Religion Teacher's Journal* (also a Catholic magazine) the week-long conference sponsored by *MS Magazine* "American Families: The Changing State of Today's Relationships." Fred Rogers had been invited to give a mid-week speech. I'll always remember the gasps from the audience on Monday when the Institution's president made the announcement, adding, "Fred Rogers has requested that no children be brought to his session later this week." What? *No children* to hear Mr. Rogers? Our puzzlement was soon cleared up by the explanation, "If there is a child within five hundred feet of him, Fred Rogers will forget about the adults and relate only to the child. This time he really wants to talk with and answer questions from adults."

Fred had turned down the invitation to make a speech at the 5000+ seat Amphitheater, choosing instead to make a few opening remarks in the Opera House and then respond to questions. The place was jammed with adults, many of them passing on to Fred greetings from their high school and college-age children, who still held their friend of long ago in high esteem. When there was a question Fred would, as he had with my children and me, first find out information about the questioner and family before responding. A grandmother tearfully told of the breakup of her son and daughter-in-law and of the almost impossibility of seeing her grandchildren following the divorce. Fred, who had been sitting on the edge of the stage, rather than standing on it, came down, giving

the distraught woman a big hug and conversing privately with her for several minutes. During this time moderator Suzanne Braun, managing editor of *MS.*, spoke with us about the importance of grandparents in a child's life, something that Fred also emphasized when he returned to the front of the auditorium. He soon was at the side of another questioner, a mother undergoing a difficult family crisis, while the moderator took over. Before we knew it the time was up, the president informing us that there was a large crowd of children outside eagerly awaiting the appearance of their television friend. I was able to slip out just before Fred and saw an episode of pure joy: on the other side of the yard was a crowd of children. When Fred emerged from the building a small boy of three or four rushed forward, his face shining with eager anticipation. Fred knelt down as he approached, and the child flung himself into Fred's arms, receiving a hug that I am sure he still remembers to this day.

Fred Rogers created not only hundreds of episodes of *Neighborhood*, but also the series *Old Friends*, *New Friends* in which he introduced to his young audience such famous people as Hoagy Carmichael, Helen Hayes, social activist clergyman Henry Sloan Coffin, Jr., and many others. He wrote numerous short booklets and videos about going to school for the first time, to the doctor's office; to the hospital; and more. Many of the 200 songs he wrote for his shows were released on record albums. And in all of them, for those who looked, was embedded the Judaeo-Christian theme of grace. In his lively special *Springtime For Mister Rogers* there is an old fashioned mellerdrama in which the villain is Mr. Meanmouth. Instead of being demolished, love and a song melt his hard heart, and the gentle person inside is released. As Fred and I sat on the set watching a tape of the closing song for that section— "You never know the story by the cover of the book, You can't tell what a dinner's like simply looking at the cook"—Fred commented that he wrote the song not just about the character, but about spring itself. The next lines are: "It's something



everybody needs to know that way down deep inside (that) things are often different from the way they look." He pointed out the window where we could see how a January storm had coated the trees with a silvery sheen. "You can't tell just by looking that underneath all that there is life waiting to come forth. But in its own time it will come. The seeds and buds will spout. Winter's just temporary. And it's that way with people, too." Thus was this creative clergyman able to work in such Christian themes as Easter without ever using God-language.

Thus I have had the opportunity over the years to write much about Fred Rogers, but the words of which I am most satisfied were the ones that I wrote for the resolution of thanks read by Mrs. Thornburgh at the Synod & Synodical of the Trinity's Tribute to Fred Rogers (marking the 25th Anniversary of his TV ministry—and yes, he did regard his work as a ministry, the TV camera and set being his "pulpit):

"Whereas Fred Rogers has been given by God unique gifts in communicating with children, and

Whereas for 25 years he has pioneered in the use of television as a means for reaching children to affirm their feelings and self-respect, and

Whereas he was ordained by Pittsburgh Presbytery to the broadcast ministry, a task he has performed in a unique way with love and grace, therefore

Be it resolved by the members of the Synodical and the Synod of the Trinity, meeting at Grove City College in 1979, the International Year of the Child, that we give thanks to Almighty God for you and your ministry, Mister Rogers, and we declare that we "like you just the way you are."