



Life Lessons from Mister Rogers

When he was 18 and a freshman in college, my younger son put himself at some risk to save the life of another student. A young woman was racing wildly up and down the halls of her dorm, naked and clearly not in control of her own actions. At one point, she perched in an outer windowsill and seemed on the verge of jumping out. As my son's campus was in downtown Pittsburgh, there was a concrete sidewalk outside, and they were on the 9th floor, so a fall from it would almost certainly have resulted in her death. My son pulled her out of the window, wrapped her in a sheet, and sat with her to protect her until the paramedics came. There were other students around who saw the situation, but they were afraid of being accused of wrongdoing and did not intervene. Particularly for male students, touching her naked body could have resulted in charges of sexual harassment, perhaps even sexual assault.

Gabe poo-pooed the idea that there was anything extraordinary about his actions. He says that anybody could see what needed to be done. It was very clear to him that she needed help and that he was in a position to give that help. I can't remember ever hearing him talk about being afraid or even worried about consequences to himself.

I'm still exploding with pride. How did he turn out so wise and so compassionate? I have no illusions about the quality of parenting he received; I think that my husband Crafford and I are pretty good parents, but all of us have heard and read about children who also had pretty good parents who turned out differently than anyone expected. Parenting isn't one of those games where you put your money in and get the final product that you were looking for. It would be comforting to think that's true, but it isn't.

The next year, whenever I went to visit Gabe, then 19, he would, very excitedly, tell me stories about his new hero, Mister Rogers. Once, Mister Rogers was being chauffeured to an event and learned that his chauffeur would have to wait outside

for him. He insisted that the man be allowed to attend the event, and on the way back, when they passed the man's home, asked if he could go inside and meet the chauffeur's family. Apparently, they really hit it off, because he ended up asking all about the family and entertaining them with jazz piano well into the wee hours of the night.

My son was struck by Mister Rogers' kindness and compassion for someone whom he'd never met. He was amazed by the friendliness and selflessness that allowed Mister Rogers to enter into the lives of his chauffeur's family. He marveled at Mister Rogers' complete lack of pretense.

I also have no illusions that Gabe's regard for Mister Rogers made him such a wonderful person, but I am noticing the person that this very kind, generous young man thinks so highly of. Gabe says that aside from his parents, Mister Rogers is the person who has had the most influence over how he chooses to behave.

What can we learn from Mister Rogers? When he died in 2003, his obituary was on the front page of most newspapers in the U.S. Usually, that kind of recognition is reserved for celebrities and heads of state and prominent athletes, not for ministers whose life's work was producing a children's television program. The story about his car being stolen and then returned with the note "sorry, we didn't know it was yours" is probably not true¹, but it gives you a clue as to his influence and the very high regard in which he is held.

First, a few facts. Fred Rogers was born in Latrobe, Pennsylvania near Pittsburgh in 1928 and he died a month short of his 75th birthday. He graduated from Rollins College with a degree in music composition and was a very fine pianist. It took him 8 years to finish seminary because he took classes along with his work in television,

¹ Snopes.com isn't sure.

but he was eventually ordained and directed to continue his work in children's television as his ministry.

He named many of the characters on the show *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* after members of his family and composed most of the music for the show, as well as about 200 other songs. His office at WQED Pittsburgh famously did not have a desk, only sofa chairs because Rogers thought a desk was "too much of a barrier".² He went into children's television initially because he hated what he saw, viewing the hurried, forced, broad humor of the early 1950s as "bombardment" of children.

He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, some forty honorary degrees³, and a Peabody Award. He was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame, was recognized by two Congressional resolutions, and was ranked No. 35 among TV Guide's Fifty Greatest TV Stars of All Time⁴. Several buildings and artworks in Pennsylvania are dedicated to his memory, and the Smithsonian Institution displays one of his trademark sweaters as a "Treasure of American History". Fred Rogers didn't drink, smoke or eat meat. By all accounts (*and I looked pretty hard*), he was universally well regarded.

He single-handedly invented the idea of using social and emotional learning as the topic for children's television programming and his ideas about early childhood development and media are prominent even today.⁵

More than 2,700 people attended his funeral and he was eulogized by former *Good Morning America* host David Hartman, heiress Teresa Heinz Kerry, philanthropist Elsie Hillman, PBS President Pat Mitchell, and at least 2 children's

² <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=PuQcAAAAIbAJ&sjid=FmMEAAAAIbAJ&pg=5185%2C9584754>, retrieved on May 8, 2014 at 2:30 pm.

³ DeFrancesco, Joyce (April 2003). "[Remembering Fred Rogers: A Life Well-Lived: A look back at Fred Rogers' life](#)". *Pittsburgh Magazine*, retrieved on May 8, 2014 at 2:35 pm.

⁴ "Special Collectors' Issue: 50 Greatest TV Stars of All Time". *TV Guide* (December 14–20). 1996, retrieved on May 8, 2014 at 2:40 pm.

⁵ <http://www.npr.org/blogs/ed/2014/05/24/314286509/why-mr-rogers-is-having-a-big-moment-in-education>, downloaded on May 25, 2014.

book authors, Marc Brown and Eric Carle. Mister Rogers really WAS as good a person as he seemed on TV.

There were many parodies of his person and his work, some of them mean-spirited and snarky, some of them friendly and affectionate; all of them a testament to his influence. He stands out in the nation's memory as an icon of unconditional love.

Fred Rogers was one of our great exemplars. He had so much depth and wisdom. And he had the urge, the very strong urge, to share not only what he had, but what he felt and what he knew. Because much of his way of being is now quite counter-cultural, so often, being smart and having a fast come back trumps deep down goodness, it's worth examining some of his core values, to see what we might otherwise miss. I'll pick just three things to talk about today: ¹a practice to develop one's self, ²a practice to understand other people better, and ³a practice to engage with other people on a practical level.

Fred Rogers had a distinct preference for taking his time, even memorialized in the lyrics to one of his songs.

I like to take my time
I mean that when I want to do a thing
I like to take my time and do it right.

I mean I might just make mistakes
If I should have to hurry up and so
I like to take my time

We live in a hurry up kind of culture. Getting lots of tasks accomplished by rushing and multitasking are so glorified that we forget what we sacrifice when we prioritize tasks over process. It is true that you can break a thing's resistance when

you push it to go faster. But rushing has an effect on emotional development as well-it can cause hardness and INCREASED resistance. Slowing down and taking time nurtures development. In a study out of Yale University, it was found that children follow a story line better at the pace favored in Mister Rogers' Neighborhood than in the celebrated Sesame Street.⁶

Mister Rogers once said, "it seems to me that our world needs more time to wonder and to reflect about what is inside, and if we take the time, we often can go much deeper where our spiritual life is concerned than we can when there's constant distraction...noise and fast-paced things don't allow us the time to explore the deeper levels of who we are, and who we can become." He believed that taking one's time in relationships conveyed the message that the other person was WORTH the time. Going slow was his personal preference, and it was the way he developed himself personally.

It takes time to develop and become accustomed to different circumstances, but ultimately, it strengthens the ability to accept oneself unconditionally and then to give that gift to another person.

Mister Rogers' practice for understanding other people better can best be understood through the lyrics to his song, "Won't You Be My Neighbor". *"It's a beautiful day in this neighborhood, a beautiful day for a neighbor. Would you be mine? Could you be mine?..."* He was always inviting people to be his neighbor, to be in relationship with him. He extended himself to other people constantly. The story I told earlier about his getting to know the family of his chauffeur is a great example of the interest he took in the people around him, all of whom he considered to be his neighbors. There's another story about his ride on a subway in New York City. He couldn't get a cab, so he slipped onto a subway at rush hour, hoping not to be

⁶ L.K. Friedrich and A.H. Stein, "Aggressive and Prosocial Television Programs and the Natural Behavior of Preschool Children," *Monographs of the Society for the Research in Child Development* 38, no. 4 (1973).

noticed. Of course, he WAS noticed and most of the occupants of the subway car burst into a spontaneous rendition of “It’s A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood”. Clearly, they had gotten his message-he considered all people to be his neighbors. He was interested in everybody’s story. He maintained written correspondence and phone contact with so many of the people he met, staying in touch, encouraging them, affirming them.

What would we do differently if we considered all people to be our neighbors, if we were interested in everybody’s story? Mister Rogers’ capacity for understanding people was enhanced, would the same be true for the rest of us? He WAS special, but it’s intriguing to think that listening to other peoples’ stories might help us to understand each other better. Maybe at coffee hour, we could practice this. Ask someone about their week, and listen. Draw them out. Don’t look for openings to give your ideas, just listen. Be their neighbor.

The last thing I want to talk about today is his practical way of engaging people. Mister Rogers never pretended to be anything other than his honest, authentic self. I’m sure he didn’t impose his own feelings on other people, indeed, one of the authors I read, Tim Madigan, wrote of meeting him for the first time shortly after Mister Rogers’ best friend had died. In spite of his grief, Rogers was warm and open. What I mean by honest and authentic is his quiet, unassuming manner that did not go to extraordinary lengths to be considered “hip” or “cool” in spite of a few detractors.

The demeaning nature of some parodies of his work must have been known to him, yet he never allowed himself to be swayed from his mission to help children feel safe. He never added razzle-dazzle to the show and he continued to try things that he wasn’t already good at, thereby exposing himself to potential ridicule. On his show, he used the puppet, Daniel Striped Tiger to share his more vulnerable side,

but he **did** share that vulnerable side and he frequently thanked people for accepting him just as he was.

As he himself said, “When we love a person, we accept him or her exactly as is: the lovely with the unlovely, the strong along with the fearful, the true mixed in with the façade, and of course, the only way we can do it is by accepting ourselves that way.”

Some great guy my son saw, huh? I am so proud of Gabe, for seeing the good and for having the courage to choose it. May we always move as slowly as we need to, may we learn that all people are our neighbors, and may we be able to share our whole authentic selves-the strengths and the vulnerabilities. Amen.

References

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