

Lessons from Mr. Rogers Neighborhood: Creating the Peace we want to see, one kind word at a time July 28, 2013

By Theresa Willingham

“There are three ways to ultimate success:

The first way is to be kind.

The second way is to be kind.

The third way is to be kind.”

— Fred Rogers

A little more than six months ago, a mentally disturbed 20-year-old fatally shot twenty children and six adult staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School in CT. At the time, UUA President Morales called upon us to work towards creating a society “ where differences are resolved without violence, where the mentally unstable do not have ready access to lethal force, where violence is not glorified...” Four months later, in April, bombs were detonated at the Boston Marathon, killing 3 and injuring more than 200 people.

During both of these horrific rends in the fabric of our society, Fred Rogers name was invoked in various popular media, specifically his call to “Look for the Helpers,” to help us focus on the humanizing outpouring of love, compassion, courage and caring that blossom in the face of the natural and manmade horrors around us.

Some of you may remember Fred Rogers, of “Mr. Rogers Neighborhood” fame. Mister Rogers' Neighborhood (1968–2001) was built around his gentle, soft-spoken personality and characterized by a refreshing directness to his audiences. I watched the show growing up in the sixties, my kids watched him into the mid-1990s – a soothing, slow paced children’s show with a little trolley and a friendly postman named Mr. McFeely (named for Fred Rogers grandfather) and puppets whose voices might sound saccharin sweet in today’s more cynical climes, but who spoke to mature themes and insights.

Fred McFeely Rogers (March 20, 1928 – February 27, 2003) was an American educator, Presbyterian minister, songwriter, author, and television host, with summertime vacation ties to Clearwater, where he learned to swim as a child, a habit that became a lifelong daily ritual.

According to biographers, “The Rogers family was social and gregarious by nature. On Christmas Eve, they invited the entire community to their open house, and their home was always filled with friends and neighbors. Among these beloved guests were Dr. Clifford E. Barbour and Dr. Jarvis Cotton of the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Dr. Cotton became an

important mentor to Fred and was instrumental in Fred's decision, later in his life, to attend the Seminary.

Fred Rogers was a gifted writer and musician, and he personally developed and wrote the scripts, manipulated and voiced the puppets, composed the music, and wrote the lyrics for each of the program's almost 900 half-hour episodes. He conferred regularly with child psychologist Dr. Margaret McFarland, who gave him a theoretical road map for the themes he wanted to explore.

In 2003, Time Magazine columnist James Poniewozik wrote, "Mister Rogers was softer than anyone else in children's TV because so many of the messages he had to impart were harder.... Mister Rogers spoke softly, but he never soft-pedaled. And he knew how to be both compassionate and authoritative." The messages Fred communicated were relevant not only to children, but also to adults, independent of their roles as parents, and to humanity at large.

His resume of lifetime achievements are manifold: He was the recipient of two George Foster Peabody Awards, five Emmys, including an Emmy for Lifetime Achievement from the national Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the TV Critics Association, and every major award in television for which he was eligible. He received more than 40 honorary degrees and delivered commencement speeches at colleges and universities across the country; he delivered the commencement addresses at Saint Vincent College in 1973 and in 2000. In 1979, the 25th anniversary of Fred's work in children's television was celebrated with a three-day symposium held at Saint Vincent College. In 2002, President George W. Bush presented the Presidential Medal of Freedom to Fred, citing his more than 30 years of entertaining and educating children through Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and commending his "legendary commitment to young people" as "an enriching part of American life." On January 1, 2003, in his last public appearance, Fred served as a Grand Marshal of the Tournament of Roses Parade, and he tossed the coin for the Rose Bowl Game.

Today, the Fred Rogers Company continues to distribute his work and produce projects in various media, and the Fred Rogers Archive at the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media is preserving his work for access by researchers, educators, and others.

Lifelines will be out next week, but in my column there, I invoked Fred Rogers as an icon of kindness and civility, a man of thoughtful sincerity and almost palpable serenity. His neighborhood was warm and welcoming, and safe, but also a place of honest reflection. He often talked about serious and sometimes sad things with the children and families who watched his show. And while he was a Presbyterian minister by training, his personal theology was very compatible with Unitarian Universalism.

“As human beings,” he said, “ our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside that is unique to all time. It’s our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression.”

At the heart of everything Fred Rogers did, created and believed in was kindness and compassion.

The reference to “Fred Rogers helpers” stems from a story he once shared: “My mother would say to me, ‘Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.’ To this day, especially in times of ‘disaster,’ I remember my mother’s words, and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers—so many caring people in this world.”

When Robert Kennedy was assassinated in 1968, Fred Rogers produced a prime time special to help parents cope with the tragedy and with what he thought, at the time, was awful media sensationalism, in an effort to give families ways to talk with their children about tragic events in the news.

“I’ve been terribly concerned about the graphic display of violence which the mass media has been showing recently,” he says in the piece. “ And I plead for your protection, and support of your young children. There is just so much that a very young child can take without its being overwhelming to him. I’ve been very frankly quite concerned about it. ... The best thing in the world is for your children to be included in your family ways of coping with the problems that present themselves at any time, but particularly now in this very difficult time in our nation. “

He shares gentle coping suggestions in the video, and in fact, his guidance is still well regarded and highly recommended today, 45 years later. “Helping Children Deal with Tragic Events in the News,” is as timely as it is unfortunate that it remains timely.

He was a model of intentionality – He weighted words as simple as “like” with the vestments of profound depth and meaning, and challenged us to really see and hear one another, to really care, to create truly compassionate communities.

“When I say it's you I like, I'm talking about that part of you that knows that life is far more than anything you can ever see or hear or touch. That deep part of you that allows you to stand for those things without which humankind cannot survive. Love that conquers hate, peace that rises triumphant over war, and justice that proves more powerful than greed.”

A community is a place where we can come together in shared camaraderie – sometimes that camaraderie is grounded in shared history or common culture or a particular affinity. I spent a

good portion of the weekend in the community of Metrocon, an anime convention where my uniquely talented elder daughter was selling wares in “Artist’s alley”.

For those unfamiliar with “anime,” it’s a Japanese animation style. But Metrocon about something more basic than that. It is Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood as Tim Burton might have imagined it, an Edward Scissorhandsian costume carnival of cosmic proportions. It’s a place to be who you are, or who you want to be, in safety, without censure or shame, where the fringe is in the majority, and the world is a good and accepting place. Not a bad vision and certainly a colorful one!

And it’s a place I think Mr. Rogers would have approved of, at last after he got over the culture shock - a place of warmth, acceptance and kindness, where as commonplace as fox tails and cardboard swords were hugs and warm greetings, where groups of people roamed linked companionably arm in arm.

“Love isn’t a state of perfect caring,” said Rogers. “It is an active noun like struggle. To love someone is to strive to accept that person exactly the way he or she is, right here and now.”

That’s a tall order. It’s also a very Buddhist one. In our Everyday Practical Buddhism class, Rev. Nick Ozuna shared an almost verbatim directive from Sakyamuni Buddha himself. It can be a struggle to love people as they are for many reasons – because they’re different from us, or difficult to be with, or because you see self-defeating or self-destructive behaviors you want to “save them from”.

But Mr. Rogers – and Buddha – are right: Love with qualifiers, isn’t love ; it’s criticism, it’s control, it’s attachment that doesn’t add to peace and harmony or provide real help and support.

As Rogers also noted, “Love and trust, in the space between what’s said and what’s heard in our life, can make all the difference in the world.”

Quieting that critical, judgmental voice in our heads isn’t easy.

I struggle continuously against myself: against the baser, less noble aspects of my being, against my short sightedness, my impatience, my foolishness, working to keep self-righteousness, expectations and judgment at bay. Sometimes I succeed. Often I don’t. Always I am aware that I could be a much better person than I am, that I could be a better wife, mother, aunt, daughter and friend.

It’s not easy, not for me. People like Mr. Rogers and the every day good people we encounter who make serenity and compassion look so elegant, if not easy, are constant reminders to me of what I could be, of what we all could be, if we just put others before ourselves more

routinely. If we – if I - had more patience. More compassion. More love. If I could really let go, unattach, stop the cycle of self-imposed suffering caused by the expectations I have of the way life ought to be as opposed to the way life is.

Thomas Merton, perhaps something of an earlier Mr. Rogers, said, “Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy.”

It's that third line – “What we are asked to do is love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy. “ It's not that all of us deserve love, which makes it a need-based experience, but that all of us are called upon to love, which puts the idea and the practice wholly in our own hands and within our sphere of influence.

Fred Rogers put it this way, ““We need to help people to discover the true meaning of love. Love is generally confused with dependence. Those of us who have grown in true love know that we can love only in proportion to our capacity for independence.”

My life – all our lives - is a work in progress, but I'm increasingly aware that I tend to overcomplicate things, to overthink the moment in which I would do better to simply be. I want to fix and help and improve, when all I really need is to be open and accepting, of the moment, of those in my life at any given moment, of whatever experience envelops me.

I can take a breath, replace a judgment with simple kind words: How nice you look today. I love your smile.

“At the center of the Universe, “ Rogers said, “is a loving heart that continues to beat and that wants the best for every person. Anything that we can do to help foster the intellect and spirit and emotional growth of our fellow human beings, that is our job. Those of us who have this particular vision us to continue against all odds. Life is for service.”

We can make a choice to be kind, to be compassionate and accepting, and to help foster our intellect, spirit and emotional growth of fellow neighbors, here at church, out in our communities, in the course of our daily lives.

If we can see ourselves through to Rogers' vision of life as an act of service to one another, then kindness and compassion is the only path to a world of loving kindness.