

Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and his Gentle Challenge to Each of Us

Rosh Hashannah, 5780

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(Choreography for entrance: Step to reading table; quietly remove and fold talis, remove sport jacket and hang up on cabinet hangar; take sweater and put it on, raising and lowering zipper in signature Mister Rogers fashion. Sing from "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...?
 Won't you please?
 Please won't you be my neighbor?

(As wave...)

"Hi neighbor, glad we're together again." Welcome to this neighborhood!

Sometimes I think I really am Mister Rogers, feeling his influence so deeply, but then I think of his words, the ones he said to all of us at the end of each program, "There's no person in the whole world like you; and I like you just the way you are." I also think about the most wonderful compliment I have ever received. I was a young father and a young rabbi. I was sitting on the floor with a group of pre-schoolers. We were singing and talking, perhaps getting ready for Rosh Hashannah, just like we are today, because, you know, we're always just getting ready. Suddenly, a gleeful, little child of about four or five years old jumped up and nearly sang out, "you're just like Mister Rogers."

The important word, of course, is "like," to be like someone, to emulate them, while still being you. I honor Mister Rogers on this Rosh Hashannah, a day of nurturing hope, and of celebrating children with painful awareness of their vulnerability. It is not simply that I want to honor this gentle hero, worthy enough in itself, but to consider what he taught us and why his teaching is so important today. I'm sure that many of us have been touched by his teaching, imbibing his spirit, whether as children who watched "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," or as parents or grandparents or teachers who watched and cried at times, knowing that this gentle man was speaking to us as much as to the little ones that both he and we loved.

I have drawn through the years to both his manner and his message, which are really one and the same. I have read his recently published biography with pen in hand and with lots of book marks on Shabbos. I have watched many of the old episodes on YouTube and have watched intently the recent documentaries about him and I look forward to the coming Tom Hanks movie. Grateful that his name will draw renewed attention, I am also wary that the essence of his message may be lost in the very hype that he eschewed. I have always found a certain resonance with Fred Rogers, if I may speak of him by name. Even before that long ago affirmation offered by a little child in a pre-school circle, I was drawn to his way of being a man, to his way of being a person, to his way of sharing his own vulnerabilities and so speaking to those of others. I was drawn to his way of speaking directly to the child within each of us. I was drawn to his way of soothing a sensitive soul, my own, even if I was not of the age of those to whom we thought he was speaking. He offered reassurance that when times are hard it will all be okay; allowing each of us to hear in the way we needed to his loving words of affirmation, "I like you just the way you are."

In a time of so many flawed heroes and leaders, with apologies to Simon and Garfunkel, "where have you gone, Mister Rogers?" A sign of his deep humility, he wondered in his dying if heaven indeed held a place for him. Mister Rogers is gone, but in the way of great souls, he is still here. He would never have seen himself as a hero, would never have wanted to be seen that way. His own flaws and struggles make him real and accessible. At times he became angry. As much as he inspired confidence in others, at times he lacked confidence in himself. His relationship with his own sons was at times fraught, struggling like the rest of us to be a parent in the way of Mister Rogers. Identifying with his very human struggles, I hear "sermon" rather than "script" when he says, "Am I kidding myself that I'm able to write a script again...? AFTER ALL THESE YEARS IT'S JUST AS BAD AS EVER.... GET TO IT, FRED!... (Maxwell King, "The Good Neighbor," p. 316-17). Of choices that incline us toward the heroic, and of those who influence our choices, he asked in a commencement address at Dartmouth College (King, p. 327), "What choices lead to ethnic cleansing? What choices lead to healing? What choices lead to the destruction of the environment, the erosion of the Sabbath, suicide bombings, or teenagers shooting teachers? What choices encourage heroism in the midst of chaos?"

Seeking to live and inculcate choices that encourage what I would call ordinary heroism, the heroism of every day decency, we look beyond the man himself, who yet remains for me exactly the kind of hero so needed today. As much as I would love to have known him, I find myself drawn in these days to the fullness of Mister Rogers' message and its radical implications if truly understood and applied; the way of radical kindness, of empathy, of love, of radical inclusion. None of these qualities were merely words for him, never offered as the lofty teachings of the ordained minister that he was. They were earthly and earthy teachings to be lived and applied in every neighborhood where we might find ourselves. It is told of how hard it was to walk with him on New York streets, even to an important meeting, because he would stop to talk with everyone who approached him, not because they knew he was Mister Rogers, they didn't, but because he exuded an openness of heart and

an openness of hand. Seeing a man being beaten on the street below, he ran out from his apartment one night to find the victim limping away. Soothing the man, he gave him a one hundred dollar bill and told him, "I just want you to know that somebody in this world loves you" (King, p. 303). As a neighborhood apart, I was startled to realize recently that his theme song actually says it is a beautiful day in *this* neighborhood, quite specific, as though to jolt and remind us that it is not a beautiful day in every neighborhood. I think he understood that very well and wanted us to hear his words as a challenge, to make it a beautiful day in the neighborhood, in every neighborhood, in the whole world as the neighborhood of humanity. That is the message of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and his Gentle Challenge to Each of Us."

I find myself drawn in these times to Mister Rogers, to the man and his message, to his manner and his method. Perhaps it is out of my own struggle to ward off despair, to cling to and nurture hope in spite of all that would deny it. Of an age at which I know that I shall not see the worst over time of what could be, of climate change, of wars and violence and hate, I cry as I think, what about the children? A television star in spite of himself, I worry, as he did, how to insure that the children of today can live with hope. I worry about my grandchildren and all of those little ones who gather on the floor in this room, the little ones all around the world, and all of the children of the human family yet unborn, how to give them hope and nurture for them the promise of the best of what could be? I admit to having struggled of late with the meaning of our striving, questions of faith and belief, of beauty and hope, goodness and kindness. Touched by my mother's eternal optimism, I am not generally wont to despair. In these times, though, I have wondered of the impact of personal goodness on a world so filled with violence, a world choking to death on the fumes of our collective greed and callous disregard for the future. Then I feel God weeping for my lack of faith. I feel the world weeping. I feel the children weeping. I hear Mister Rogers' weeping, as he did one day in his office during the Gulf War, when his producer came to bring him down to the studio. About to go on the air, she found him despondent, almost in tears, saying, "Why am I doing this? What good is this going to do?" (King, p. 316). He did go on the air and at least for those children on that day, he helped to make it a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

But what about the other children, all of the children, the children of those who were the children then, when Mister Rogers looked out at them and spoke through choked-back tears? What about all of the neighborhoods where it is not a beautiful day, where it never is? It is why Fred Rogers the man felt overwhelmed some time, and why we do too. What about those neighborhoods, some very near to here, where gunfire is part of the cadence of day to day life, where a badge and gun sow fear, where Black lives seem to matter little? What about those neighborhoods whose children don't know the meditative quiet of a green yard and the refuge of a sitting room like that of Mister Rogers' TV house that becomes, at least for a short time, all of ours? What about the children of migrant families at our southern border? The horror would have been unbearable for him, the wellbeing of children and families at the heart of his life's work, families separated, children put in cages. How would he have shielded children from the lies and vile speech of bullies on the playground of politics, or empowered them to challenge those who would so demean, and those who would trash with their cynical policies and inaction the neighborhood of earth?

His way of teaching was meant to empower, and so it still does. He does not let us give in to despair because the children need us, the world of today and of tomorrow needs us. Though he consciously avoided entry into the political fray, he did not hesitate to make the obvious connections in his writing and speaking between personal goodness and the choices we make in the world. Responding to the very love he offered, touched by the hope of bringing a beautiful day to every neighborhood, we know there are times when we need to make a great noise in the public square. We know there are times when we need to offer fiercely loving resistance to business as usual, to the ever increasing normalization of mendacity and brutality that becomes the banality of evil. We know there are times when we are called to put our bodies on the line, to sing songs of courage for ourselves and others, times to shatter complacency with the sound of freedom's great shofar. Carefully protecting the image of Mister Rogers as someone to whom anyone could turn, he planted seeds he hoped would germinate in all of the children of his television neighborhood, regardless of the state of the neighborhoods from which they watched or the context of their lives, and regardless of their parents' politics.

That was his greatest hope and his most radically subversive intent, that the children of Mister Rogers Neighborhood would go out into the world and plant seeds of kindness and openness in all the neighborhoods to which they would come in the journeys of their lives. In that way, whether or not we were then, in our yearning for a more peaceful and loving world and in our quest to get there, in our love and our fear for the precious children and their future, we are all children of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. Modeling the way he believed the world could be, as in the pacifist teaching, "there is no way to peace, peace is the way" (generally attributed to A.J. Muste), he taught us a way of being in the world, a way of being with the children, a way of being with ourselves, a way of being with each other. His way of teaching and his manner of being was one and the same with the lessons he taught. That is one of his reminders to us as parents and teachers, asking us to look at our own behavior as the children will see it, and as they will feel and be affected by it. His gentle and loving spirit was unselfconsciously meant to model gentleness and love. Offering a way of day to day activism for all of us, he quietly and persistently sought to change the world one child at a time, challenging by example prevailing attitudes regarding such difficult issues to talk about as race, gender, and sexuality.

Ever so simply, he taught great lessons to little people, even if in their essence and implications they were lessons yet unlearned by big people. In 1969, at the time of the first anniversary of Rev. Martin Luther King's assassination, Mister Rogers invited an African American neighbor to come and cool his feet with him in the backyard of his television home. It was such a simple, human gesture whose lesson he trusted would not be lost on children. In a child's wading pool, two grown men's feet, black and white together, made ripples with their toes, as children would, in the still waters of the way it had always been. When it was time to go, the white man, ever so simply, reached for a towel and dried off the black man's feet (King, p. 206).

On this day that celebrates the world's birth and coming to be, our neighborhood of earth now so imperiled, care of people and care of earth have become as one. The suffering of children, Isaac, Yishma'el, Samuel, is juxtaposed liturgically on Rosh Hashannah with the childhood of earth in our crying out with the Musaf soundings of shofar, *ha'yom harat olam/today is the conception of the world*. And we look at ourselves and our own ways during these days and ask what we can do to make it better, to be better, to bring more goodness into the world. Personal goodness, and so too its opposite, sends ripples out into the world. The impact of both kindness or cruelty is felt most directly by our children, and they are all our children, all children of vulnerable earth, all children of God, creator and womb of earth. And the children carry those ripples of good or bad further out into the sea of humanity, cresting on the shores of generations to come. The impact of a nation's cruelty is felt most directly by children, ripples of our goodness seeming overwhelmed in times such as these. I think particularly of children at the border. I think of one child in particular whose face stays with me, a child I met in a children's shelter in El Paso while visiting the border last spring. As I try to hold this child's face, it merges and becomes one for me with the face of a Holocaust child that stares at me weekly from a page in a small book of Shabbos table songs and blessings. I imagined his longing for his parents, of his parents' longing for him. I wondered, as he must, of their whereabouts; wondering if and when they shall be reunited. At the core of Mister Rogers' work is the wellbeing of every child without exception, and the way that we see children, whether we see them, and how they see themselves.

These were not simple teachings of Mister Rogers, and for too many of us not easy to apply or believe in practice. Meant to inspire goodness through self-worth, they were hardly throw away lines, as he stopped and looked directly into every set of eyes beyond the screen, those of children and those of parents. Affirming the self-worth of every child with his warm closing reminder, "there's no person in the whole world like you; and I like you just the way you are," he was also affirming for that child the specialness of every other child. It was not just about making children feel good, as his critics charged, or of ignoring cognitive learning, but of teaching the importance of how we use the gifts of hand and heart and mind. "What really matters," he wrote, "is whether one uses the alphabet for the declaration of war or the description of a sunrise -- numbers for the final count at Buchenwald or the specifics of a brand-new bridge" (King, p. 248). Nurturing self-worth, he sought to empower children to know, and to bravely affirm in practice, that anything that demeans another human being is wrong, a recognition that love of others is deeply entwined with love of self, with how we see and value ourselves. It is one of the ways our own commentators have understood the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, *v'ahavta l're'acha kamo'cha* (Lev. 19:18), meaning to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

In the convergence of great souls and their wisdom, I delight and find hope in common teaching from worlds apart. Mister Rogers would have found great resonance in the teaching of the Slonimer Rebbe, Rabbi Sholom Noach Berzovsky, who died in Jerusalem in 2000, just three years before Fred Rogers died in Pittsburgh in 2003. The signature theme of the Slonimer is the uniqueness of every person, *There is no person*

who is just like another person, from the day of the creation of Adam and onward, and there is not one person who is able to repair what devolves upon their friend to repair. And therefore, every person has their own unique purpose and task through which it is for them to bring repair in their lifetime (N'tivot Shalom, Par. Lech L'cha). Sharing our unique gifts and the way of repair that is each of ours, we help our children to know their own infinite worth and that of others. Affirming each one's presence and importance, we help to bring to fruition from prophetic imaginings the great Sabbath of a beautiful day in every neighborhood.

That to me is the deeper meaning of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood of Make-Believe, a holy of holies within Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, a place to imagine new possibility, not only as playful fantasy, but as what ought to be. In the way of Shabbos timelessness, there are no hands on the clock in the Neighborhood of Make-Believe, "a place," says Mister Rogers in a letter to a young friend, "where we pretend things can be any way we want them to be..." (King, p. 332).

ENTER SEA OTTER: (Look down to right pant leg as though distracted..., "what's this?" Reach down to bag and come up with puppet on right hand):

Sea Otter: Excuse me, Rabbi Victor, "I'm sorry to interrupt you right in the middle of your sermon.

Rabbi Victor: "That's quite okay, Sea Otter," how nice to see you. What's on your mind?"

Sea Otter: "I've been listening to you very carefully, and I'm feeling sad. I don't think that I am so special or that I have anything special to teach. And you know (with a muffled cry), when Mister Rogers' little friend, Daniel Striped Tiger comes to visit us, I don't think I'm so cute."

Rabbi Victor: "Oh, dear sweet Sea Otter, I'm so sorry you're feeling sad and I'm so glad that you're able to tell me how you are feeling. Sometimes it's hard for all of us to see what is special about ourselves. That's why it is so good to have a friend who can tell us just why we are special to them. And you know what, Sea Otter, you are very special to me. And you are just right Sea Otter cute and dear Daniel is just right striped tiger cute."

Sea Otter: "Thank you, Rabbi Victor, that makes me feel better already. Now that I'm not feeling so sad, I can remember something special that you said I taught you and how you smiled when you said why my name is Sea Otter. It's because I *see* the world the way it '*otter*' be.

Rabbi Victor: That is beautiful, Sea Otter, thank you! That really is your special teaching that you are in the world to teach. I hope that we can all learn to see the world like you do and together help make it a beautiful day in the neighborhood.

Sea Otter: Can I say one more thing, Rabbi Victor?

Rabbi Victor: One more thing, Sea Otter, and then I really need to finish my sermon, but we'll get to talk more later.

Sea Otter: I want to say, Rabbi Victor, (singing out with a gleeful child's voice) you're just like Mister Rogers!

Rabbi Victor: Oh, Sea Otter, thank you, (voice catching) now you're going to make me cry, you know how much Mister Rogers means to me.

Remove sweater and hang up, put on jacket:

And thank you to all of my neighbors. I want to say to each one of you, there's no person in the whole world like you; and I like you just the way you are.