

# THE WONDER OF IT ALL

Fred Rogers and the Story of an Icon

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FRED ROGERS CENTER  
for early learning and children's media  
at Saint Vincent College

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# OUR MISSION

STAYING TRUE TO THE VISION

OF FRED ROGERS

AND EMULATING THE GUIDING PRINCIPLES

OF HIS LIFE'S WORK,

THE MISSION OF THE FRED ROGERS CENTER

IS TO ADVANCE THE FIELDS

OF EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDREN'S MEDIA

BY ACTING AS A CATALYST

FOR COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION,

AND CREATIVE CHANGE.

Milton Chen, Ph.D.\*

I've been privileged to be part of the work of the Fred Rogers Center, dating back to early discussions about its formation with Fred. After his untimely passing, a frequent topic among Center staff and Advisors has been how to capture “the essence” of Fred: how to communicate for a variety of audiences who he was and his development as a TV performer, writer, musician, and educator. For most of all, Fred Rogers was a consummate teacher who used the medium of television in innovative, meaningful, and even surprising and counterintuitive ways. What were the key influences in his life and work, in his family, schooling, and community that led him to shape this medium in ways that we had not seen before nor since?

In this essay, Maggie Kimmel and Mark Collins provide some important and fascinating answers. And, as Fred would have appreciated, those answers can lead to deeper questions.

“The Wonder of It All: Fred Rogers and the Story of an Icon” takes us on the journey of Fred Rogers’ life, beginning with his childhood in the small town of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, outside of Pittsburgh. Those years included memorable times with his grandfather, who gave Fred one of his trademark phrases, telling him, “Freddie, you make my day very special.” We learn of a friendship that began in high school with George Allen, who taught Fred to fly a Piper Cub. In Fred’s description of his friend, we hear the echo of what he himself would model on TV: “He was so enthusiastic about flying. I know that’s why I wanted to learn. The best teacher in the world is somebody who loves what he or she does and just loves it in front of you.”

We travel with Fred during his college years at Dartmouth and his transfer to Rollins College in Florida, where he majored in music and was welcomed by friends that included his fellow music major and future wife, Joanne. And we arrive at a seminal moment in 1951 when, as a college senior intent on further seminary studies, Fred Rogers witnessed a moment of televised cruelty — a children’s program showing people throwing pies at each other — and decided to do something about it.

There is much more, with revealing stories about Fred’s career during the early years of television, when a budget for a children’s TV series consisted of one yellow legal pad. Importantly, we also learn of Fred’s deep interest in child development. This interest was focused through his work with Dr. Margaret McFarland, director of the Arsenal Family and Children’s Center. Fred’s time at Arsenal also provided opportunities to learn from Dr. Benjamin Spock, founder of the Center, and its frequent guest, Erik Erikson.

One quote from Lawrence Laurent, a *Washington Post* journalist, movingly captures Fred Rogers’ legacy: “He causes the rest of us to care and to care more than we ever cared before.” I hope this essay will likewise cause us to care more than we ever have before about improving children’s media in this digital age. The future work of the Rogers Center will include oral histories, published online, with close colleagues and friends, who will cast further light on Fred Rogers’ life and times. For now, savor this essay on “the essential Fred Rogers,” who taught so many millions of children, parents, and child care providers to care and care deeply, through those intimate visits to his television *Neighborhood*.

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**R**esearch begins with a hypothesis, a premise, a statement. It rarely ends with a prayer.

This project started as something of a follow-up to the volume we co-edited in 1996, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*.

It soon became something else. New sources, especially interviews with *Neighborhood* colleagues and friends and Rogers himself, led to new questions. We wrestled with the accuracy of certain dates, certain memories. We wrestled with the origins of his child development theories. We wrestled with the premise itself — were we writing about Fred Rogers the person or Mister Rogers the icon?

Much of what we found reinforced what we already knew, that Fred Rogers was genuine and thoughtful and incredibly, subtly a visionary. Retracing his path through television is a reminder of the power of one person to bring great change. He has become such a part of the twentieth-century landscape that we forget the scale of his contribution. As the following pages document, Rogers' focus and insight, even his testimony before Congress and the Supreme Court, forever changed our attitude toward children's television programming.

But our research also brought discovery. First, Fred Rogers' career before *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* is often reduced to a few lines, i.e., started with NBC, collaborated with Josie Carey in *The Children's Corner*, went to Canada to film *Misterogers*, then found fame with *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* on PBS. This snapshot resume is both accurate and misleading. Each step was a strange collision of planning and serendipity, but it was *not* a linear progression. Some findings were surprising. For instance, Fred Rogers and Josie Carey turned down a regular, nationally televised program on NBC. Other findings were vitally important but rarely written about. Joanne Rogers notes, for instance, that family commitments often dictated Fred's career choices, which is hardly a trivial factor for someone so devoted to the welfare of children (including his own). As editors, we understand the necessity of condensing a career into a few paragraphs, but we'd like to add a word of caution for Fred's future biographers: The beginnings of Rogers' vocation are as important as its celebrated climax.

Secondly, we were continually struck by Fred's method and approach. While previous analysis had shown his diligence and thoroughness in crafting each program, we hadn't realized how his attentiveness was part of a much larger framework. It was an approach that both embraced and transcended the usual (tepid) descriptions such as "sincere" and "trustworthy." Rogers' work and life represented a devout *practice*, more akin to a spiritual discipline. In studying speeches, scripts, and stories, we found him wholly engaged in every moment. Perhaps this trait more than any other explains the near-mystical connection that so many felt toward Fred Rogers, whether they met him once or 100 times — or only met him through television.

It was, however, our personal and professional connection to Fred Rogers that led to our greatest frustration. We are happy with the work in front of you, but we are troubled by what remains undone. Each interview revealed more and new aspects of his past; each article unveiled yet another perspective on his life. For example, we could have filled several volumes with the intensely personal outpouring of affection that followed Rogers' passing. While we briefly cover his family — both his birth family and his family with Joanne and their sons — we found much more to explore. The people who worked with him, many for many years, are also worthy of more than a passing mention. Perhaps we, too, were initially beguiled by Fred's seeming simplicity, failing to see just how endlessly complex such simplicity can be.

We end this apologia in supplication — hands out, palms up. What follows is an invitation to you. Fred's life and work inspired millions; this analysis commissioned by the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media is but a first step in understanding his legacy. We encourage those who want to know more to begin their own journey. We hope you find it rewarding and fruitful.

Finally, we ask your indulgence. For a moment, we need to drop our academic persona and speak on a more personal level. We pray that our work has honored Fred Rogers. We pray that your work, whatever it is, will do the same.

Margaret Mary Kimmel\*

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**A**nnie and the Old One by Miska Miles is the story of the love between a little girl and her grandmother. The family lives in a small house on the Navaho Reservation where the Old One is famous for her weaving. One day Annie's grandmother announces that when the rug she is weaving is finished, it will be time for her to join the ancestors. Annie is devastated. Every night when she thinks the family is asleep, Annie gets up and undoes the weaving her grandmother has crafted that day. But her grandmother is very wise and, knowing what Annie is doing, invites her for a walk. Here is a short excerpt from the book.

When they reached the small mesa, the Old One sat crossing her knees, folding her gnarled fingers into her lap.

Annie knelt beside her.

The Old One looked far off toward the rim of the desert where sky met sand.

"My granddaughter," she said, "you have tried to hold back time. This cannot be done.... The sun comes up from the edge of earth in the morning. It returns to the edge of earth in the evening. Earth, from which good things come for the living creatures on it. Earth, to which all creatures finally go."

Annie picked up a handful of brown sand and pressed it against the palm of her hand. Slowly she let it fall to earth. She understood many things.

The sun rose but it also set.

The cactus did not bloom forever. Petals dried and fell to earth.

She knew that she was a part of the earth and the things on it. She would always be a part of the earth, just as her grandmother had always been, just as her grandmother would always be, always and forever.

And Annie was breathless with the wonder of it all.<sup>1</sup>

As we celebrate the life and legacy of Fred Rogers, so too, are we, breathless with the wonder of it all.

**T**he accolades were many. The awards, the speeches, the recognition by generations of young people as a significant figure in their lives — these are all tributes to the person of Fred Rogers, *Mister Rogers* to millions. But who was this person? How was he able to create such an impact? He influenced both policymakers and family life. He was an advocate for the frailest among us, the very young and the very old. In a world of enormous change, he produced a television program that changed little in more than 30 years of broadcasting, yet it was a program that changed lives. He could bring tears to the eyes of the most hardened cynic and laughter to those who were unloved. His moments of silence were more eloquent than most orations. How did this happen? What has he taught us? What is Fred Rogers' story? What is *our* story?

The goal of this paper is to demystify Fred Rogers the icon by identifying the people, concepts, and stories that created the enduring legacy of Fred Rogers the person. **Our focus is less on the *Neighborhood* itself (about which countless articles have been written), and much more on events and people that influenced Fred Rogers, and the impact he had on people and policy.**

Part of the work presented here is an extension of the book of essays, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, that we co-edited (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996). However, the present research utilizes several resources unavailable in the first book — most notably interviews with Fred Rogers' contemporaries during his time in New York and his early days on Pittsburgh television, plus interviews with Rogers himself. This additional material has proved invaluable, since it paints an early portrait of the many influences on Fred Rogers' later work. The work has also drawn upon the expertise of the University of Pittsburgh's Center for Social and Urban Research to bring together and codify the many themes present in Fred Rogers' speeches, as well as the recurring messages that are found in outside sources such as news articles, book chapters, and magazine features.

This recent research has led to new directions. Fred Rogers' background — his story — is **the** key ingredient to understanding his television mission. His early years in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and his television work as floor manager for NBC and later on *The Children's Corner* at WQED and *Misterogers* for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Toronto crafted the essential message related to the healthy development of children that became *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* for PBS.



What is that “essential message”? After decades on the air, hundreds of programs, and innumerable re-broadcasts, what are we to glean from the *Neighborhood*? There are three answers. The first is to describe what wasn’t part of the message, despite the conventional wisdom of what Mister Rogers was “all about.” The second is to dissect the medium itself — how Fred Rogers turned the burgeoning vehicle of television into something wholly unique and lasting, and created the perfect device for conveying a highly individual message in the unlikely context of mass communication. The final answer is to tell Fred Rogers’ story as part of our larger, collective, frankly human story.

But first things first — what *wasn’t* part of the message? Unless the program is demythologized — the commonly accepted “moral” of the *Neighborhood* — and unless the man himself is demythologized, we will still be anchored to a chimera, to something less than honest. Let’s begin with the message. Although Mister Rogers often said *you are special*, he never said “you are special without limits, without obligations.” Instead, his speeches and his writing and his interviews were peppered with the importance of responsibility — both to self and to others. This is fundamental to understanding the message behind the program; those who feel that the moral is “a child can do no wrong” aren’t merely mistaken but woefully irresponsible.

The truth is Mister Rogers never said the world was always safe, always sunny, always a good place. A quick review of the roster of *Neighborhood* themes — death, divorce, strife between friends — is anything but jolly, nor were the resolutions always neat. In one episode, Neighbor Aber has a reluctant conversation with Prince Tuesday about his divorce and the fact that he misses his children. At the end of the program, Neighbor Aber is more willing to talk about his feelings — but he and his wife are still divorced and he still misses his children. No *deus ex machina* descends to repair his marriage.

In fact, the traditional idea of “morality” in the religious sense gets little play in *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. What’s interesting is that Fred Rogers rarely mentions God in his program and occasionally discusses God in his speeches, but not in the traditional manner of a seminary-trained, ordained Presbyterian minister. There are, of course, obvious reasons why a public figure on a public television station wouldn’t discuss God to a diverse, secular audience; but Fred Rogers’ ministry was deeper and subtler than public pronouncements. His words and work — his entire life — are imbued with a spirituality that transcends denomination or religion.

**Our goal is to discover facets of the story of Fred Rogers within the context of contemporaneous events, influences, impacts, and audience. The overarching purpose here is to put Fred Rogers' experience into a larger arena: how his maturing understanding of what's special within each of us was translated both across decades and across television, becoming part of our greater story.**

The decision to pursue these themes comes from rooting through the many misconceptions of Fred Rogers and his work. For instance, the most popular notion of Fred Rogers runs something like this: always smiling, a dawdling pace, indecipherably friendly — in short, not that different from the children who watched his program. It is essential to dispense with the clearly clichéd image that children can't discern the genuinely friendly from the falsely friendly. The focus must relate to a more troubling notion that undergirds this assumption: that Fred Rogers' professional growth was somehow — what's the word? lessened? checked? hindered? — by his single-minded concentration on childhood and his pre-school audience. Many adults consider the concept that children can sit still for any length of time false, yet children were and are mesmerized by Rogers and his neighbors. He never considered himself as actor or performer, but rather as friend stopping by to visit with other friends. To that end, he wrote all of the more than 900 scripts and the music and lyrics to more than 230 songs.

While it's possible to entertain the question of Fred Rogers' maturity, the premise is absurd: that any adult who relates well to children is somehow less able to deal with adults and adulthood. Such a hypothesis withers under the briefest examination. Successful adults, like successful children, figure life's complexity to its simplest elements, not its most intricate. Examples are legion: Hemingway's spare style, Apple's Steven Jobs' insistence on the ease of use in every product, Einstein's revolutionary physics resting on the slight shoulders of five tiny symbols:  $E=mc^2$ . Edward Everett spoke first at the dedication of Gettysburg; when Abraham Lincoln later finished his own 285 words, Everett said, "I should be glad, if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes."<sup>2</sup> No one argued.

In fact, some of history's greatest minds have focused on understanding childhood as a way of understanding adulthood. Socrates and Freud asked the same questions, albeit in different contexts: Children seem to know things in different ways than adults, and it is crucial to understand how and why. Philippe Aries' *Centuries of Childhood*<sup>3</sup> suggests that the very notion of "childhood" (as opposed to "small adults") influences how civilizations see themselves and others. Rogers articulated simple and clear elements of complex child development theories.

Of course, this discussion is both very academic and very Western. Over the centuries, spiritual philosophers often focused on freeing oneself from the mental and material constraints that hinder one's journey — in essence (and all that the word “essence” implies), the goal is to return to a purer state. Like Socrates, the path toward a greater “truth” requires a disciplined re-learning of *what we already know* but must now re-discover. “We’ve forgotten what it’s like not to be able to reach the light switch,” Fred Rogers once observed.

**We’ve forgotten a lot of the monsters that seemed to live in our room at night. Nevertheless, those memories are still there, somewhere inside us, and can sometimes be brought to the surface by events, sights, sounds, or smells. Children, though, can never have grown-up feelings until they’ve been allowed to do the growing.**<sup>4</sup>

The emphasis on *essence* (core, fundamental nature) — for both adults and children — lies at the heart of Fred Rogers’ work. This is not to argue that Fred Rogers was the yogi or saint of PBS; rather, the attempt here is to unearth the disciplined re-learning that permeates *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, and to demonstrate that these thoughtfully considered practices were an elemental part of the program’s format and legacy — its story.

Henri J. M. Nouwen, a renowned theologian and good friend of Fred Rogers, once gave a practical definition of the spiritually gifted who walk among us:

**Although we tend to think about saints as holy and pious, and picture them with halos above their heads and ecstatic gazes, true saints are much more accessible. They are men and women like us, who live ordinary lives and struggle with ordinary problems. What makes them saints is their clear and unwavering focus on God and God’s people.**<sup>5</sup>

It seems fitting that these attributes — ordinary lives struggling with ordinary problems with unswerving focus — might also apply to the development of the *Neighborhood* and its creator. Perhaps the best way to discover how Fred Rogers the person became Mister Rogers the icon is to trace his history, his story. At the risk of overstating the spiritualism theme, Fred Rogers’ work mimicked the path of his development: from unscripted and slightly chaotic to mostly scripted and far more disciplined. This is not to say that Mister Rogers — the person or the program — lost spontaneity or lost the ability to live in the moment; it does mean that a different purpose — the balance from spontaneous whimsy to carefully crafted script — required a more enlightened and diligent practice.

**T**he small town of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, on Loyalhanna Creek, is in southwestern Pennsylvania in the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains just west of Chestnut Ridge. Wide streets and sturdy homes typify this close-knit community that takes great pride in its history and contribution to the social and cultural lives of its people. It is here that Fredrick McFeely Rogers was born to James Hillis Rogers and Nancy McFeely Rogers on March 20, 1928.

Rogers was eleven when his sister, Nancy Elaine, Laney, was born. The senior Rogers worked in the McFeely Brick Factory, eventually buying it from his father-in-law and later buying the Latrobe Die Casting Company. It was a prosperous, hard-working, faith-based family and one that was very protective of young Fred; the Lindberg kidnapping had parents all over the country worrying about safety issues. Rogers spoke often about memories of his family.

**Dad.... started out as a laborer, and as time went on he... finally bought the company. He was a wonderful man, just beloved by the town. And my mother was too.... I think she had something like 25,000 volunteer hours at the hospital. She loved being a nurse's aide. And during the Second World War she was in charge of making surgical dressings for the troops. I remember, as a little boy, going down and seeing the people folding these gauze squares, and then they would ship them off. She'd also knit sweaters for the troops. In fact, my mother, as long as I could remember, made at least one sweater every month. And at Christmas time, she... had about twelve very close people to her. There was dad and my sister and I, of course, and my grandmother. She would give us each a hand-knit sweater every Christmas. Until she died, those zipper sweaters that I wear on the *Neighborhood* were all made by my mother. We would open up the boxes at Christmas and we'd all try on the sweaters. Then she would say, "Okay, now what kind of [one] do you want next year? Now, I know what kind you want, Freddie, you want the one with the zipper up the front."**<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the loving home, however, not all of Rogers' memories were happy. Young Fred was shy, overweight, and sickly. One summer he was restricted to a room where it was air-conditioned because his mother was afraid that humidity would worsen Fred's asthma. He remembered that summer as "very uncomfortable." Rogers often commented about his sense of isolation as a child. The adults in his life suggested that he ignore what others thought of him; those admonitions stayed with him his whole life. Rogers remembered his loneliness as a child, his feelings of being outside the group.

**I was... very, very shy when I was in grade school. And when I got to high school, I was scared to death to go to school. Every day, I was afraid I was going to fail... I resented those kids for not seeing beyond my fatness or my shyness. I didn't know that it was all right to resent it, to feel bad about it, even to feel very sad about it. I didn't know it was all right to feel any of those things, because the advice I got from the grown-ups was, "Just let on you don't care, then nobody will bother you." <sup>7</sup>**

The young man's main outlet was the piano, for which he showed much early promise. Music proved to be an endless source of solace and joy for Fred Rogers. His mother often played for him and he began to play himself when he was only five. Rogers claimed that in an age when one didn't speak of feelings, music allowed him to express fear or anger or pleasure. Rogers also had a ventriloquist puppet and often put on plays for and with neighbors.

Although it was his grandmother who gave Rogers his first piano, it was with his Grandfather McFeely that Rogers enjoyed the most freedom. The two spent many hours together and Rogers recounts his grandfather saying that it was a good thing for him to walk along a stone wall, when his mother would have insisted that the youngster might get hurt. These gifts — music and free time with his grandfather — influenced much of his life's work. A later song, "What Do You Do?", was a reflection of this early use of music to express his feelings. Rogers remembered his grandfather saying to him, "Freddie, you make my day very special." That phrase — and music — became a hallmark of Fred Rogers.

Adults were his most frequent companions, and this sense of isolation from other children was exacerbated by the fact that the family spent winter months in Florida. In high school there was an incident that changed his own perspective as well as how other young people thought of him. An athlete, star of the football team, was injured and spent some time in the hospital. Rogers was asked by one of his teachers and encouraged by his mother to take books and assignments to the young man, Jim Stumbaugh. Through frequent visits, the two became good friends, a friendship that lasted a lifetime, and that friendship seemed to give Rogers more confidence. It also changed how his classmates saw him.

Another friendship was influential in Rogers' development. A young African-American man, George Allen, was befriended by the Rogers' family. Allen was the son of the Rogers' housekeeper

who died when Allen was sixteen and Fred was five. Allen taught Fred to fly in a little Piper Cub when Fred was in high school. Allen went on to become a pilot and flying instructor as well as a jazz pianist. “He was so enthusiastic about flying,” Rogers later recalled. “I know that’s why I wanted to learn. The best teacher in the world is somebody who loves what he or she does and just loves it in front of you.”<sup>8</sup>

By his senior year in high school, Rogers was editor of the yearbook and president of the student council — a far cry from the sickly, shy, overweight child. Despite his later success, memories of his early years had enormous influence on how Fred Rogers related to children... and how children related to Fred Rogers.

When Rogers began his studies at Dartmouth College, it was assumed he would attend the seminary after college and become a minister. The Rogers family belonged to the First Presbyterian Church in Latrobe; Rogers regularly attended services and church school. In a 1999 interview with the *Archive of American Television*, he was asked if he had a religious life in Latrobe. “You bet we did,” Rogers replied. “And what continues within me is the knowledge that each one of us can be used in perfectly wonderful ways.”<sup>9</sup> Dr. Jarvis Coffin, vice-president of the [then] Western Pennsylvania Seminary, was a good friend of the family and was one of the people who suggested a seminary career. Coffin’s son-in-law, Rev. William Barker, became one of Rogers’ closest friends and the voice of several of the puppets on the *Neighborhood*.

Although focused on romance languages at Dartmouth, Fred decided to switch his major to music. It was a Dartmouth professor who suggested transferring to Rollins College in Florida because the music program was more established there, which Fred did after his sophomore year. Not only did Rogers receive his degree in music composition from Rollins College, but he met his wife-to-be there. Joanne Rogers recalls their first meeting.

My teacher said to several of us that a young man was coming down to see the college, from Dartmouth [College] — that he wanted to be a music major.... He [Fred] flew down. And one of our friends in the music department... had a wonderful old car.... And we were hanging out the windows when he came out — and [we] grabbed him, and just took him right with us and made him one of us. And he just blended in so well. We took him first... to the music department.... to the practice rooms. He sat right down and started playing some pop stuff. And we were so impressed, because none of us could do that.... We couldn't just sit down and play jazz. And he could. He could do it all. So we were very impressed, and he was fun.<sup>10</sup>

By 1951, his senior year at Rollins, Rogers had been accepted by the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, but while home on a vacation he first saw television programming for children. It appalled him to see people throwing pies at each other and he decided he wanted to be involved with this new medium to make it something better. This simple (and rather abrupt) decision forever changed both the medium and the man.

With his degree in music composition, Rogers took off for New York City and began work at NBC on October 1, 1951. Legendary television producer Kirk Browning remembers getting a call from a friend about a young man who was interested in music and wanted to be involved in television. Browning was with *NBC Opera Theatre* and later went on to produce the NBC Philharmonic concerts led by Arturo Toscanini and *Live from Lincoln Center*.<sup>11</sup> Rogers was hired as the assistant to the producer Charles Polacheck, although he later worked with Browning. Rogers worked on several productions with *NBC Opera Theatre* with Browning; his memories of Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* were especially vivid. This groundbreaking production was one of those stepping stones that could launch a career in national television. Over time, Rogers became the floor manager for several different music programs — *The Voice of Firestone*, *The Hit Parade*, and *The Kate Smith Hour* among others.

Rogers married Joanne Byrd in 1952 and the two set up housekeeping in New York. The times were exciting for a young man in television but Rogers had a call from his father describing a new educational broadcasting station in Pittsburgh, near his family in Latrobe. Leland Hazard, an executive at Pittsburgh Plate and Glass (PPG Industries), was chair of the board of the new station-to-be. Despite the fact that Hazard “was a formidable man” as Joanne Rogers recalled, Fred flew out to Pittsburgh, was interviewed and offered the job as program manager.<sup>12</sup>

So, after little more than two years he decided to leave New York. Browning recounts how friends were stunned by Rogers' decision. They told him that he could be a producer or director or most anything in New York. The station wasn't even on the air in Pittsburgh; how could anyone leave a promising career in New York for a non-existent station in Pittsburgh? But leave he did, returning to Pittsburgh to help found WQED, the first community-owned public station in the nation.

**I was... just at the right place at the very right time, and every year that went on, I knew that the decision to leave New York and to come to Pittsburgh and launch into this place that nobody had ever heard of was... the correct one, for me. It gave me a chance to use all the talents that I had ever been given. You know, I loved children, I loved drama, I loved music, I loved whimsy, I loved puppetry.<sup>13</sup>**

Rogers' memory, however, presents WQED in a far more organized light than the reality. The fact is there was no children's program. Dorothy Daniel, who was the general manager of the new station, came into the office one day and announced that they were only a month from going on the air and there was no program for children. Were there any volunteers? Rogers volunteered as did a young actress, Josie Carey, who was working as a secretary to help the fledgling station. Although Rogers and Carey have slightly different versions of how *The Children's Corner* came to be, by all accounts it was almost accidental. The two volunteers had one month to develop what later became *The Children's Corner*, an hour of live programming, five days a week, done on the ultimate of shoestrings. As Carey later recalled:

**Our only budget.... you want to know what we were given? One legal pad a season, a yellow tablet. That was it. That's the only budget that we had for the program. We used it very carefully. We would do one rundown a day on this sheet of paper because that was all we had.<sup>14</sup>**

The night before the station went on the air Mrs. Daniel had a party. Each person got a small present; Fred received a hand puppet which naturally was named "Daniel." The original plan for the program was to feature short films. Josie would sing and be shown on camera; Fred would play the organ and remain behind the scenes. Josie was to introduce the film of the day.

The set consisted of a sheet on which were painted several features. On the very first day, Fred made a slit in the large clock in the middle of the canvas set and "Daniel" came out of his clock and spoke to Josie. Over time, Daniel became a key character. Rogers later recalled, "I mean it was just



magical the way they would converse and it was all ad-libbed, [Josie] would tell him [Daniel] her problems and he would listen. And so we thought, well why don't we try some other characters?"<sup>15</sup> So new puppets were introduced, including King Friday, X the Owl, Henrietta, and Lady Elaine.

Much of the program was spontaneous, sometimes the result of a conversation at lunch. The humor and whimsy of the conversations were natural and spur-of-the-moment, but even in those early years Rogers was always conscious of the audience and their needs. If the humor was a bit of slapstick or seemed in any way to make light of children's feelings or emotions, Rogers would insist on discussing it later. Although Carey claimed that no one really "argued" with Fred, those "discussions" could be lengthy and involved.

The pair tried to involve the viewers as much as possible, and had a variety of guests from the community — representatives from the zoo, the symphony, a magician, or even someone to teach exercises. Since the program was live, there were problems everywhere at most anytime. One day someone called in sick and a University of Pittsburgh student who was walking by the station was asked to help. When he asked what he was to do, the casual answer was, *oh, you know, just operate the camera.*

Fred would sit behind the scenes to play the organ, but then had to run nearly across the studio to the set where the puppets were. He started wearing sneakers so that there wouldn't be any noise and he also had to hold his hands on his pockets to keep change from jingling. He was seldom on camera, except when he wore a mask as Prince Charming and taught Josie ballroom dancing.

The program was very successful in the community. At one point WQED decided to hold an open house for the local community and they were overwhelmed with families who lined up around the block, waiting in a chilly rain to meet Rogers and Carey and to help celebrate Daniel's birthday. In fact the program was so successful that Rogers and Carey were asked back to New York and NBC as a short-term replacement for Paul Winchell and his puppet, Jerry Mahoney. Carey recalled:

**We broke a record for how much mail they got. I think they got a hundred and thirty eight thousand letters.... We brought everything that we did in Pittsburgh.... We just kind of went in, did it and went back home again. No publicity, no promotion, they got a hundred and thirty eight thousand letters. [After the month was up] they had to find a place to put us back on.**<sup>16</sup>

So when they finished *The Children's Corner* on Friday in Pittsburgh, the two would pack up and fly to New York to do a live show on Saturday and return to Pittsburgh on Saturday evening so that Fred could go to church on Sunday. Those weeks of commuting were probably the hardest time, Carey said later, noting that the only thing she and Fred asked for in the contract was that they stayed based in Pittsburgh.

**That was the only thing we insisted on. The NBC lawyers just looked at each other as if we were out of our minds. This was an opportunity of a lifetime. We didn't cash in on it at all. In fact, they wanted to introduce us to the journalists and the people who would do promotion publicity but Fred wanted to get back to Pittsburgh to go to church on Sunday morning. And I always felt I could have fought harder, I'm sure, or I could have stayed in New York. But I always felt that God really did have a hand in what was happening to us. I'm certain the reason we didn't continue to work together is that Fred wouldn't have become Mister Rogers, if I had still been out front.**<sup>17</sup>

After awhile, both were tired of the travel and the schedule. Rogers had been attending the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary on his lunch hours and was required to take a class in counseling. He requested to work with children and his advisor approved the plan if he worked with Dr. Margaret McFarland, who was the director of the Arsenal Family and Children's Center. The Arsenal Center was founded by Dr. Benjamin Spock, at that time a faculty member of the University of Pittsburgh's School of Medicine. The Center's program was to provide a place for pediatric students to study child development. It was with those studies that Rogers began his frequent meetings with McFarland, a professional relationship that would last three decades. Erik Erikson was often a guest at the Arsenal Center, lecturing and leading discussions about child development. Having studied with Anna Freud, Erikson was a member of the Harvard Medical School faculty and his theories of psychosocial development were, and still are, influential in the study of the development of the personality. The Arsenal Center was a mecca for those who wanted to study children and their development. Rogers spent hours with the children there, watching, listening, and learning from McFarland, Spock, and Erikson. He observed children at play and watched them interact with the puppets he brought.

When Rogers was about to graduate from the Seminary with a specific charge to minister to children and their families through television, the plan was to produce a television program for the Presbyterian Church, but money to support it wasn't available. And just at that moment Fred Rainsberry, head of children's programming for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, invited Rogers to Toronto to do a children's program — 15 minutes with puppets and music. There was one stipulation, however: Rogers had to come out in front of the camera, talking directly to children. He was reluctant at first, but with the encouragement of Rainsberry, Rogers agreed. The first year the family was in Canada was for planning and preparation. In the second year in Canada, *Misterogers* began a year-long run with Rogers talking to viewers as well as the puppets.

Although the program was very successful in Canada, Rogers had to make a decision about staying in Canada or returning to the States. Joanne Rogers recalls that the decision also involved their visitor status — to apply for citizenship or extend the visa — and both decided to return to Pittsburgh. They wanted to be close to family, especially because their two sons were very young at the time.<sup>18</sup>

Although he had no specific job, Rogers returned to Pittsburgh, continuing his lifelong dedication to child development studies. He worked with children at the Bellefield Presbyterian Church while waiting for WQED to secure funding for a children's program. By 1965, Rogers was planning and preparing for a Sunday afternoon program for WTAE, a commercial Pittsburgh television station, that ran from October through December 1965. It was also during this time that he began to identify people who ultimately would form the cast and crew of the *Neighborhood*.

Eventually funding did become available and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* began its first run — from October 1966 to May 1967 — in the Pittsburgh area. In the second year, the Eastern Educational Network offered the *Neighborhood* a chance to broadcast in Boston, Washington, D.C., Chicago, New York, Miami, and San Francisco. But funding was still a problem and there were very real fears that the program would be cancelled. As part of its publicity efforts to boost the program, WGBH in Boston decided to hold an open house and prepared for some 500 guests — a number they thought they would be fortunate to have. On the appointed day, WGBH was overwhelmed with more than 10,000 people — more than attended the Red Sox game that day. Shortly after that reception the Sears-Roebuck Foundation agreed to underwrite the *Neighborhood*.

On February 19, 1968, the first national broadcast of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* — funded by Sears — went on national television. One year later the first color program was aired. Rogers formed Family Communications, Inc. in 1971 and many of the people from the cast and crew helped develop other projects. This production company was the vehicle for many of the special projects that Rogers and the group produced, including a series of interviews with families of children who had cancer, and programs about going to the hospital or dentist or other times when children might need an encouraging friend.

By May 1975, Rogers suspended production of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. He took a sabbatical and spent time preparing for a new series entitled *Old Friends, New Friends*. Two seasons of this series were produced and in 1979, Rogers began work on the *Neighborhood* again, this time doing three new weeks per year, each week devoted to a particular theme, i.e., noisy and quiet, opposites, or going away and coming back, to name only a few. The last program was filmed in 1999 and shown in August 2000.

The format for the program to be offered by WQED had been developed over years. The knowledge of child development and needs of the primary target audience, viewers from three to five years of age, informed much of the program format. Rogers was convinced from his work with Margaret McFarland of the need to build the environment prudently. The difference between “reality” and “fantasy” had to be carefully articulated. The separation and transitions needed to be clear even to the youngest viewer. The topics to be covered were centered on the basic developmental needs of young children and building the esteem and the trust of the children. Vocabulary, stories, examples, and experiences used by both neighbors and puppets had to be appropriate to the primary audience. Over the years, many commentators remarked on the opening sequence in which Rogers entered his home and changed from the outside appearance to the inside appearance — that is, took off his jacket and put on a sweater, took off his loafers and put on sneakers. Yet the person of the adult was maintained: always the tie and shirt, always Mister Rogers, never Fred.

As Rogers recalled, there was a sequence to producing the program. The field trips or remote sites such as factory videos were usually completed first, but some remotes took longer than others. The Neighborhood of Make-Believe episodes were worked through before the interiors in his television house were shot. He estimated that for every minute on the air, there was at least an hour

of production. Rogers said, “That doesn’t count the script writing, telephone calls and production meetings. It may look effortless and so it should. But much time and effort goes into just one half-hour program.”<sup>19</sup> All those concerned with the program insist that the content was primarily Rogers’, although often cast and crew were included in the development of a particular theme or issue. Regular contact with McFarland, who encouraged Rogers’ creativity, was also a part of the program’s growth. Some scenes were repeated seven or eight times until Rogers was satisfied. One of the staff might say that this part needed to be a bit faster or that something would look better in a different place, but the script — the content — was Rogers’ alone.

And sometimes mistakes were kept. Ella Jenkins, the folksong artist, was a guest one day and did a hand-clap game called “Head and Shoulders.” Rogers kept missing the sequence and everyone expected to repeat the taping.<sup>20</sup> Fred, however, insisted on keeping the sequence as it was. On another occasion the world-famous marine biologist, Sylvia Earle, made an appearance.<sup>21</sup> She brought a hydrophone with her to help viewers hear noises that fish make when they are eating. There was much preparation of equipment and anticipation on the part of everyone in the studio. They waited and waited and nothing happened. The fish stayed at the bottom of the tank. Again the staff and crew were prepared to redo the sequence, but Rogers decided — as he had in the “Head and Shoulders” sequence — that children need to see that even things adults plan for don’t always work. There were many other occasions, however, when sequences were shot and repeated until the pacing or the timing or the words were “just right.”

Despite these rare instances when mistakes were deliberately kept in, each segment was very carefully planned — a real difference from the far more impulsive *Children’s Corner*. Yet the program retained the look of an in-the-moment program, helping to keep the young audience interested. One web blogger recently commented, “I don’t think *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* is scripted *per se* except in the Make-Believe segment. I think there’s an ad lib element that’s key to the show’s charm” — showing that even adults can be fooled by the seamless, spontaneous nature of the program.<sup>22</sup>

Of course the music was also a central part of what happened. Johnny Costa, the music director of the *Neighborhood*, was a well-known jazz pianist. He said he wasn’t interested in playing “for kids” but Rogers persuaded him that the music would be a significant feature of the program, identifying themes and sequences. The music was actually taped live to fit with the events in each program.

Music opened and closed the program. It was used to highlight important moments as well as to complement Trolley's transition from the reality *Neighborhood* to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. And the songs themselves became part of the vocabulary of childhood. Rogers' commencement speeches brought audiences of former *Neighborhood* viewers to their feet, singing "It's a beautiful day in this Neighborhood...."<sup>23</sup> A group of children in a New York subway broke into song, "Please won't you be my neighbor?", when Rogers ducked into the subway to escape a torrential downpour on street level.<sup>24</sup> When you're recognized on a subway — out of context, far away from home — fame has clearly arrived.

It is tempting, then, to draw a straight line from Latrobe to international recognition. Every career move — from Rollins College in Florida to NBC in New York — seems like a sensible stop along the way, the product of good planning and obvious destiny.

But Rogers' story, like all our stories, is only linear in the rear-view mirror. Fred Rogers' career was anything but direct; decisions were based on family concerns and geography, plus an ineffable combination of serendipity, faith, and gut judgment. As it turned out, each decision led to a learning experience with far-reaching influence. It cannot be overstated: Fred Rogers' early years in television — from his first venture at NBC to his decision to start *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in Pittsburgh — were crucial to Fred Rogers the person and Mister Rogers the icon.

Take, for instance, the environment that Rogers found at NBC in the early 1950s when live television was far closer to bedlam than organization. Rogers, fresh (*fresh*) out of college, new to television, schooled in rigors of music composition, was floor manager. It was his job to coordinate the directions of the control booth to the actors and crew onstage. Even the exceedingly modest Fred Rogers recognized the role.

**Gabby Hayes [a famous sidekick in cowboy movies and star of the *Gabby Hayes Show* in the early 1950s]... said to me one day, "do you realize that you're the only face that I see?.... the person that I'm closest to is you.... it makes such a difference if the floor manager seems interested in what you're doing."<sup>25</sup>**

It was the floor manager who corralled the chaos: orchestrating cameras (no small feat at the time when cameras resembled the size and weight of small-block Chevy V8s), coordinating technicians (who were none too eager to listen to a 24-year-old music major from Latrobe), and managing the egos of stars such as Kate Smith (“who was *always* Miss Smith,” recounts Joanne Rogers, “never Kate”).<sup>26</sup> With typical self-effacing humor, Rogers remembers the time he signaled for the backdrop to be raised behind “Miss Smith” — about 30 seconds too early.

**There was one funny day, didn't seem funny then, but she was standing in front of this painted set that was a farmhouse, singing one of her songs... I thought it was over. I gave a cue to the stage hand to raise the scenery so that we could get on to the next scene. Well, the song wasn't over... [and] on camera, of course, that looked like Miss Smith was going down into the ground. Well I was watching the monitor and of course, I knew exactly what had happened, so then I stopped the rising of the set. But I'll never forget. It was just like having her descend.**<sup>27</sup>

But it wasn't just the challenging technical aspects that left a mark on Rogers. While he himself was born into an upper-class family, he never developed an upper-class attitude toward others — a lesson that apparently wasn't universally taught.

**When you serve people cokes and coffees and whatever they might want, you see what people are like. I'll never forget the day, and I can't tell you who it was, somebody said to me, I wanted milk and not sugar! I just felt crestfallen. I did my best to bring what I was asked to bring to people for refreshment. I'll never forget how that felt. 'Course, I went off and got the correct thing. [Another] time, while I'm thinking about it, is that my wife and I were at the same hotel as this very famous movie star. And at the swimming pool, everybody was taking her picture. I guess I made the mistake of asking her if it would be all right if I could take her picture. And she said, *I'd rather not*. I think of that every time anybody asks if they could take my picture with them. I invariably say, “Of course.”.... Maybe that's just because I'm who I am and she was who she — I don't know. But I know that it affected me.**<sup>28</sup>

What's crucial about the memory is how Rogers tells it — not “I was wronged,” but “this is what I felt, and this is what I learned.” The impact of Rogers' early professional years was felt both professionally and personally; his growth into children's television was based not only on extensive study but on an ancient principle of how people should treat people. Again, this is not merely a curious quirk of Rogers' personality but a fundamental part of how *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* came to be.

It was also Gabby Hayes who taught Rogers that looking directly into the camera and speaking directly to one child at a time was a crucial element. It was something that not only became Fred Rogers' trademark, but also served to connect him to his far-flung viewers.

**I said to him one time, “Mr. Hayes, what do you think about when you look in the camera and know that there are thousands of people looking at you?” And he said, “Freddy, I think of one little buckaroo.”... That must have gone straight to my heart because when I look at the camera, I think of one person... not any specific person but one person... it's a very personal medium.<sup>29</sup>**

Rogers came to view that space between Mister Rogers and one viewer at a time (multiplied by nearly 10 million) as sacred space. His burgeoning vision of the possibilities of television as a “personal medium” clearly influenced his later work, starting with *The Children's Corner*. The anarchy of live, unscripted television began to interfere with Fred's vision of what was best for the program's young viewers. As Josie Carey remembered:

**Fred got so that he started to worry about wording.... I was doing my program at KDKA. I did a show in the morning there and then I went out to QED and did [*The Children's Corner*] in the afternoon with Fred.... [the man] I worked with at KDKA was just the total opposite of Fred. He would do anything for a laugh and he didn't care what the message was. So at one time, he came**



out and said he'd lost his baby and I said, "Oh, where was the last place you saw it?" He said, "I think it's in the glove compartment of a car that was headed to Cleveland." I was laughing about it before we started to do *The Children's Corner*; I told [Fred] about it and he was appalled. "Do you realize that is one of the worst things you can tell a child? A child is so afraid of being left or lost and it's such an enclosed place, the glove compartment. The child is going to feel...." And I said, "Hey, it's a joke. It's a silly program." Fred thought it was just horrible.<sup>30</sup>

This key transition — from unscripted to carefully planned, where every script carried a message — paralleled the transition Rogers made himself: from local television talent to iconic status. And such status carried with it certain responsibilities, even on a national stage.



**F**red Rogers' history is not confined to Fred Rogers' biography. His impact on the larger stage requires a larger context. For instance, if Rogers had retired in 1969, and never had produced another program, his influence would still have been enormous. This is one of those chapters in Fred Rogers' story that seems nearly mythic; perhaps our collective memory has made that day more historic than it really was.

In a word, no. May 2, 1969 was that historic, and Rogers was that influential. In early 1969 — in the days prior to PBS as we know it — the Nixon Administration suggested slashing half of public broadcasting's federal budget, a \$10 million hit. Two days of Senate hearings were held in May, chaired by Senator John O. Pastore (D-RI); the last witness was Fred Rogers. Apropos of his tough-guy image, Pastore invited Rogers' testimony with a gruff, "OK Rogers, you've got the floor."

What happened next is the stuff of rhetorical legend. Eschewing his prepared remarks, Fred Rogers simply asks Pastore to read Rogers' submitted testimony — but even this request has the typical Rogers touch.<sup>31</sup>

**Rogers:** One of the first things a child learns in a healthy family is trust — and I trust what you have said: that you will read this. It's very important to me; I care deeply about children.

**Pastore:** (*interrupting*) Would it make you happy if you read it? (*Some laughter from audience*)

**Rogers:** I'd just like to talk about it, if it's all right.

**Pastore:** I understand. Okay.

Fred Rogers' spoken testimony — without notes — offers a powerful lesson in sincerity. His opening statement is simple: Acknowledge the cost of the program, but provide the context, and then link that context to universal ideals.

**Rogers:** My first children's program was on WQED 15 years ago, and its budget was \$30. Now with the help of the Sears-Roebuck Foundation and National Educational Television as well as all of the affiliated stations — each station pays to show our program. It's a unique kind of funding in educational television. With this help, now our program has a budget of \$6,000. It may sound like quite a difference, but \$6,000 pays for less than two minutes of cartoons — two minutes of animated....

what I sometimes say is “bombardment.” I am very concerned — as I know you are — of what’s being delivered to our children in this country, and I’ve worked in the field of child development for six years now trying to understand the inner needs of children. We deal with such things as the inner drama of childhood. We don’t have to bop somebody over the head to make drama on the series — we deal with such things as getting a haircut or the feelings about brothers or sisters and the kind of anger that arises in simple family situations. And we speak to it constructively.

What’s interesting is how Rogers avoids a pedagogical argument, favoring instead something much more intimate: the health and well-being of children. And by including the chairman in the conversation (“*I am very concerned — as I know you are — of what’s being delivered to our children in this country....*”) he engages Pastore.

**Pastore:** How long of a program is it?

**Rogers:** It’s a half hour every day. Most channels schedule it at noontime as well as in the evening. WETA here (in Washington, D.C.) has scheduled it in the late afternoon.

**Pastore:** Could we get a copy of this so we can see it? Maybe not today but I’d like to see the program.

**Rogers:** I’d like very much for you to see it.

**Pastore:** I’d like to see the program itself — or any one of them.

Then Rogers provides the committee with an impromptu, heartfelt summary of his life’s work, relying on the same kind of simple human connection that steered the program itself. If Senator Pastore wants a glimpse of the *Neighborhood*, Rogers will oblige — literally, with his signature sign-off:

**Rogers:** ....[A]nd this is what I give. I give an expression of care each day to every child, to help him realize he is unique. I end the program by saying, “You’ve made this day a special day by just your being you. There’s no person in the whole world like you. And I like you just the way you are.” And I feel that if we in public television can only make it clear that feelings are mentionable and manageable, we will have done a great service for mental health.

By this point, the hard-nosed senator from Rhode Island, son of immigrants, first Italian-American elected to the United States Senate, is quite undone:

**Rogers:** ....I'm constantly concerned about what our children are seeing. And for 15 years I've tried, in this country and Canada, to present what I feel is a meaningful expression of care....

**Pastore:** Do you narrate it?

**Rogers:** I'm the host, yes. And I do all the puppets and write all the music and I write all the scripts.

**Pastore:** (*interrupting*) Well, I am supposed to be a pretty tough guy and this is the first time I've had goosebumps for the last two days.

The audience laughs; Rogers — who has now reduced a full Senate hearing to an intimate, two-person conversation — kindly responds:

**Rogers:** Well, I'm grateful — not only for your goosebumps but for your interest in our kind of communication.

Rogers then asks Pastore if he'd like to hear the lyrics to one of the *Neighborhood* songs. It's a strange moment in the hallowed halls of the Senate: a grown man reciting a child's song to other grown men, but by now they feel as if they, too, are complicit in Rogers' mission:

**Rogers:** ....And it starts out, "What do you do with the mad that you feel?" And that first line came straight from a child. I work with children doing puppets in very personal communication with small groups.

(*reciting*): *What do you do with the mad that you feel*

*When you feel so mad you could bite?*

*When the whole wide world seems oh, so wrong...*

*And nothing you do seems very right?...<sup>32</sup>*

**Pastore:** I think it's wonderful. I think it's wonderful. (*Pause*) Looks like you just earned the \$20 million. (*Applause*)<sup>33</sup>

Less than two years later — 1971, the next scheduled appropriation — Congress increased public broadcasting funding from \$9 million to \$22 million.

It would be unfair to say that Fred Rogers was solely responsible for saving public broadcasting; however, it's hard to imagine the increase without Pastore's blessing. Commenting on the hearings, the *Washington Post's* Lawrence Laurent painted Fred Rogers' contribution in a larger canvas.

**I happened to be a member of a most cynical profession which deals mostly with mankind's failings in a cynical society. Fred Rogers — as best I can tell — has managed to escape the calloused, the embittered, the negative aspects of being a public performer. He is doing the one thing in the world he wishes to do, and he is, by any definition, a happy man.... He causes the rest of us to care and to care more than we ever cared before.**<sup>34</sup>

The testimony before the Pastore committee wasn't Fred Rogers' first foray into a national issue. Two days after Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles — and two months after Martin Luther King Jr. was gunned down in Memphis — Rogers made a special appearance on public television to address parents.<sup>35</sup> On the *Neighborhood* sound stage, and apparently without a script, Rogers spoke about what was important to children. Again he used the tools of his unique trade: story, song, and sincerity. During the half-hour program, he makes a few visits to Make-Believe — which must have surprised the grownups who tuned in for an adults-only Mister Rogers' special. At one point, Daniel Striped Tiger — the most sensitive of the *Neighborhood* puppets — asks his friend Lady Aberlin to blow up a balloon and let the air out. Lady Aberlin does as Daniel suggests, but Daniel remains confused.

**Daniel:** What if you blow all *your* air out?

Then you won't have any left, just like the balloon.

**Lady Aberlin:** People aren't like balloons, Daniel. We get our air back in.

Watch. (She breathes slowly in and out.)

**Daniel:** (*suddenly*) What does "assassination" mean?

**Lady Aberlin:** (*Long pause, obviously distraught by the question*)

Have you been hearing that word a lot today?

**Daniel:** Yes. And I didn't know what it meant.

**Lady Aberlin:** Well, it's when somebody gets killed in a sort of surprising way.

**Daniel:** That's what happened, you know. That man killed the other man.

**Lady Aberlin:** I know. A lot of people are talking about it right now.

**Daniel:** Too many people are talking about it.

**Lady Aberlin:** A lot of people are sad and scared about it.

**Daniel:** I'd like to talk about it another day.

**Lady Aberlin:** Whenever you'd like.

There would be no resolution of Daniel's feelings this special day in Make-Believe. We have a puppet — clearly playing the scared child in all of us — who wants to talk about what happened, yet who doesn't want to talk... a sentiment shared by many in those terrifying times. During the same special, Rogers notes:

**No one of us has all the answers. I, as a father, certainly know that. And there's no one prescription for every child. But listening is so important. Most of us talk a lot and that doesn't leave much time for listening.**

By the end of the half-hour, it's clear that the program wasn't merely meant to help parents deal with their frightened children; it was aimed to help parents deal with their own feelings.

**We all have different ways of coping.... Maybe you'd like to talk about yours with the people who are closest to you.**

**I always say to the children, you've made this day a special day by just your being you and you have. I care deeply about you and your families. I hope you know that. Good-bye.**<sup>36</sup>

He reprised such spots several times, most notably after September 11, 2001. Not surprisingly, the overarching message is drawn from experience. When Rogers was a boy and would witness something frightening, his mother would tell him, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."<sup>37</sup> In the hands of a lesser light, such optimism might sound cloying, but Rogers always grasped what children *needed* to hear, not what we *wanted* them to hear or what we thought they *should* hear. In times of crisis, children needed to hear they would still be loved and that hope and help were still possible. More importantly, he recognized that children weren't separate categories but part of a family — a family whose parents could also use guidance and support. He once wrote, "Parents are like shuttles on a loom. They join the threads of the past with the threads of the future and leave their own bright patterns as they go."<sup>38</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising of Fred Rogers' contributions resides in a little-known but crucial Supreme Court decision, *Sony Corp. v. Universal City Studios* (1984).<sup>39</sup> It's hard to imagine now, but Sony's Betamax video recording system — the first viable home-recording unit — was instrumental in something that's taken for granted today: recording a program (or song or other copyrighted content) for one's personal use. When it introduced the product in the early 1980s, Sony advertised that people could "time shift" their television viewing by taping now and watching later. Universal and Disney — with the backing of nearly everyone in Hollywood — sued Sony, citing copyright infringement. In the kind of measured rhetoric that marked the debate, the Motion Picture Association of America's Jack Valenti told Congress, "I say to you that the VCR is to the American film producer and the American public as the Boston Strangler is to the woman home alone."<sup>40</sup> In a landmark Supreme Court 5-4 decision, the majority ruled that it was the *users'* obligation to follow copyright laws, not the maker of recording devices. Rogers' testimony was noted by the Court — not only because it came from a producer of content and thus someone who would seemingly benefit from strict copyright regulation — but because it recognized the importance of providing parents with choices.

**Some public stations, as well as commercial stations, program the *Neighborhood* at hours when some children cannot use it. I think that it's a real service to families to be able to record such programs and show them at appropriate times. I have always felt that with the advent of all of this new technology that allows people to tape the *Neighborhood* off-the-air, and I'm speaking for the *Neighborhood* because that's what I produce, that they then become much more active in the programming of their family's television life. Very frankly, I am opposed to people being programmed by others. My whole approach in broadcasting has always been "You are an important person just the way you are. You can make healthy decisions." Maybe I'm going on too long, but I just feel that anything that allows a person to be more active in the control of his or her life, in a healthy way, is important.**<sup>41</sup>

In a vein similar to his testimony before Pastore 15 years before, Rogers' conversational style ("Maybe I'm going on too long...") belies a far more meaningful message: If technology can help busy families spend time together, it's a worthwhile pursuit. The goal is not marketing *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* to achieve the best Arbitron ratings; the goal is developing a safe place for families to watch the program together, if they so choose.

Such logic is consistent with Rogers' understanding of families and television and communication. When Eddie Murphy parodied the program on *Saturday Night Live* ("Mr. Robinson's Neighborhood"), Rogers said nothing — what child is up at midnight watching *SNL*? On the other hand, when Burger King used a similar-to-Fred actor to sell its products, phone calls were made and the commercial was axed: Even the *hint* that Fred Rogers would help merchandise burgers might compromise the trust he developed with his audience.

One of the last times that Fred Rogers was on the national stage was also one of the most poignant. After being given a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 1997 Daytime Emmys, Rogers' acceptance speech brought only silence — literally: "So many people have helped me to come to this night," he began:

**...some of you are here, some are far away, and some are in heaven. All of us have special ones who have loved us into being. Wouldn't you just take... ten seconds to think of the people who helped you become who you are — those who have cared about you and wanted what was best for you in your life? Ten seconds of silence; I'll watch the time.**<sup>42</sup>

With that, Rogers stepped away from the microphone and looked at his watch. There was nervous laughter throughout the crowded theater... and then silence. The director — desperately panning the audience, no doubt to make up for the lack of drama on the stage — found one celebrity after another misting up and then crying. After ten amazing seconds (never was "dead air" so misnamed), Rogers concluded, "Whomever you've been thinking about, how pleased they must feel to know the difference you feel they have made."

And so it was, in moments like this — through the transition from chaotic early television through a carefully planned program, from a lonely boy in Latrobe to a national figure in the halls of the United States Senate, to Peabody Awards, lifetime achievement awards, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom — that Fred Rogers developed into an iconic figure on the American landscape.

But icon of what? What does it all mean? The history, the legacy... to what does it add up? A laundry list of memories, albeit fond ones, important ones?





When a day passes it is no longer there," I.B. Singer, Nobel Laureate, once wrote. "What remains of it? Nothing more than a story. If stories weren't told or books weren't written, man would live like beasts — only for the day. Today we live but by tomorrow today will be a story. The whole world, all human life, is one long story."<sup>43</sup>

As the late George Gerbner, former Dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communication, has noted, storytelling is an ancient art. In the beginning, stories had many purposes.<sup>44</sup> In some places, stories were the history of the people; in others, a way of transmitting belief. Indeed, all the great religious leaders were storytellers with parables and lessons — Buddha, Muhammad, Jesus Christ, the stories drawn from the Torah. The narratives are vivid, compelling. Story became ritual and the storyteller's position was changed to priest or shaman or prophet.

The act of writing and the invention of the printing press changed that process of story. The *person* of the teller was removed and the story was moved from the immediacy of the moment. The listener became reader and lost that sense of immediacy. The loss was mitigated by certain advantages: by time to reflect on the story, to personalize it, to apply it to one's own situation, to gain perspective on an issue. The development of radio, then the cathode ray tube and all the technology it spawned, including television, meant the reappearance of the storyteller in our homes, in some places as constant as wallpaper. The teller was there to say, "Believe me, because I was there and this is true." Fred Rogers saw this medium as one with amazing possibilities. He felt that the relationship between the teller and the listener/viewer was a powerful one, creating that sacred space that's as urgent and durable and important as those first storytellers. How? *Fred Rogers knew that the story was only as important and divine and necessary as his unseen audience; his audience was the story.*

In *Life's Journeys*, Rogers talks about the first time he saw the Dalai Lama, on television of all places, and his first reaction was to understand compassion in the stories of others.<sup>45</sup> In another excerpt from *Life's Journeys*, he describes how he came to his personal understanding of the importance of caring for others.

I sought out stories of other people who were poor in spirit, and I felt for them. I started to look behind the things that people did and said; and little by little, concluded that Saint-Exupéry was absolutely right when he wrote in *The Little Prince*: “What is essential is invisible to the eyes.” So after a lot of sadness, I began a lifelong search for what is essential, what it is about my neighbor that doesn’t meet the eye.

“Let on you don’t care, then nobody will bother you.” Those who gave me that advice were well-meaning people; but, of course, I *did* care, and somehow along the way I caught the belief that God cares, too; that the divine presence cares for those of us who are hurting and that presence is everywhere. I don’t know exactly how this came to me, maybe through one of my teachers or the town librarian, maybe through a musician or a minister — definitely across some holy ground.

My hunch is that the beginning of my belief in the caring nature of God came from all of those people — all of those extraordinary, ordinary people who believed that I was more than I thought I was — all those saints who helped a fat, shy kid to see more clearly what was really essential.<sup>46</sup>

This is how and where Rogers changed from popular children’s television host to icon. His themes — self-worth, empathy, understanding — seem at first to be the natural byproduct of his vocation... until one realizes that Rogers embraced and embodied these themes in his own life. Tell a stranger that you once met Fred Rogers, and the first question will always be the same: “What is he *really* like?” The mind — the culture — cannot reckon this kind of calculus: Either he’s on television and famous *or* he is genuine. He cannot be both. It’s not the expected story.

In all the commentary about Rogers and his work that was reviewed for this paper, whether feature article or obituary, there are a few overriding themes. One is the highly personal reaction of the observer (often a journalist) to Fred Rogers. Those familiar with the *Neighborhood* and Family Communications simply accept this reality: that to talk to Fred Rogers is to become a friend of Fred Rogers. However, this reaction goes against every journalist’s training, a violation of their commitment to objectivity. In the *Journal of Communication* article, “The World’s Nicest Gown-Up: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of News Media Coverage of Fred Rogers,” Temple University Professor Ronald Bishop examines how journalists who “start off skeptical of Rogers and his approach find

themselves captivated by his message.” As a result, “they insert this experience into their coverage.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, in his exhaustive study (“87 newspaper stories, 3 guest columns, 1 editorial, 11 broadcast news transcripts, and 1 online story representing the work of 83 journalists”<sup>48</sup>), Bishop found that reporters not only put aside their objectivity, but do so consciously — a move best illustrated by Bishop’s summary of writer Patrick McGuire’s profile of Fred Rogers in the *Baltimore Sun*. Bishop writes:

**[Here was McGuire’s] strategy for getting past Rogers’s gentle demeanor:**

**“Love,” you scribble in large letters.... It’s a word that he has been using for 25 years to just about everybody in his neighborhood. Even his fish. And so, shrewdly, you scrawl a dash after ‘love’ and scribble the hard-hitting “What’s the big deal?”**

**During their interview, Rogers handed McGuire a picture of his grandson. Rogers was disappointed when McGuire told him that he left photos of his children in his office. McGuire then sheepishly asked his question about love. “Well, you know the answer, don’t you? There’s no bigger deal than love,” Rogers explained. McGuire came to a realization: “You sigh because now you understand. You don’t interview Mr. Rogers. You do what you do in any neighborhood. You hang out.” McGuire stopped playing the role of reporter: “You let the notebook fall to the floor and you just sit and just talk and sometimes you ask questions.” Rogers and McGuire ended up having a warm, friendly conversation. “Sometimes you find yourself delivering lengthy answers to thoughtful inquiries into your family, your children, your hobbies, so thrilled to find an eager listener that you eventually catch yourself blathering,” McGuire wrote. Here, McGuire stepped outside the role of observer to give his own reactions to Rogers. [McGuire] made himself — and by implication, the field of journalism — a significant part of the rhetorical vision of Rogers. Rogers counters the cynicism and self-absorption that have damaged their credibility. Further, reporters are relieved to be covering someone so unpackaged. He may have an agenda, but it’s one that journalists can embrace.”<sup>49</sup>**

Perhaps there is a fantasy theme to the journalists’ profiles about the *Neighborhood*, but those introspective themes take reporters outside their comfort zones and demand a certain self-criticism. “Reporters offer their confessions to Mister Rogers,” Bishop concludes, “then return to their newsrooms poised to look more critically at themselves and at the mass media.”<sup>50</sup>

The idea that journalists trust Fred Rogers implicitly is no surprise; add their names to a much longer list. But even critics acknowledge a much deeper truth that fosters such trust. Fred Rogers serves in a sort of parental role for kids and adults alike, and — despite our experience with human nature — we can't help but respect such sincerity. As Claire Dederer wrote in *The New York Times* in 2005:

**Today there's nothing remarkable about a sneaker-wearing guy who hangs about the house during the day. But in 1967 a father sitting around talking to kids all afternoon was a father out of work. And the presence of such a fellow on national television was, in a certain sense, radical. For this first generation of viewers — my generation — Mr. Rogers was a kind of fantasy of fatherly availability. When Mr. Rogers took you out to a restaurant, he gave you a thoughtful disquisition on proper table settings and the function of a menu. He shared slow-spoken thoughts like, "I like whole wheat bread." He gazed into the camera — that is, at you — all the while. When your own dad took you out to a restaurant, it was spilled juice and a spanking.<sup>51</sup>**

This somewhat unnerving honesty — the full attention, the straightforward, intense gaze — can create a difficult realization for parents. As media critic Bob Garfield noted, tongue squarely in cheek, the fact that Mister Rogers is always reliable might serve as an antidote "for the problem of me."

**Mister Rogers may have a very serious wardrobe disorder, but he has never once neglected his children in favor of housework, tax preparation, or the Redskins-Eagles game. He has never renege on a promise; when he says they're going to the sneaker factory, by God they're going, and right now. He has never exploded like flashpowder before their eyes, causing them to literally shudder at the suddenness and excessiveness of the fulmination. He has never made Mommy cry — and, if he had, he wouldn't have subtly shifted the blame to her. In short, he is a totally dependable adult.... living evidence that the Mom-and-Dad-established rules of conduct have some basis in grown-up reality.<sup>52</sup>**

The elements that made the icon famous — dependability, pacing, vocabulary, and the sincere regard he gave to the individual viewer — are not merely reflections of his work. Fred Rogers' story, his *essence*, is tied to his own introspective examination that continually influenced his essential message: the inherent worth of the individual child, connecting to that special viewer across that sacred space.

In the more than 40 commencement addresses he gave, and honorary degrees he received, his own thoughts become more clearly articulated. For many years Rogers kept a handlettered plaque of the phrase, “What is essential is invisible to the eye.” If one considers the context of that phrase from *The Little Prince*, there is a clear and strong connection with a significant concept that appears throughout Rogers’ work. The Prince is stranded on an unknown planet and in searching for a friend, comes across a fox. The Prince asks the fox if he knows the Prince’s friend, the rose. And would the fox be a friend to the Prince on this planet at this time?

The fox said, “If you would love me, tame me.”

“But what does that mean — ‘tame’?” asked the Prince.

The fox replied, “If you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world.”

“...And now here is my secret, a very simple secret; what is essential is invisible to the eye... Men have forgotten this truth... But you must not forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.”<sup>53</sup>

If one takes that sequence and compares it to the text for the song “It’s You I Like,” the similarities are quite striking.

*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.*

*The way you are right now,*

*The way down deep inside you,*

*Not the things that hide you*

*Not your toys — they’re just beside you....*

*I hope that you’ll remember*

*Even when you’re feeling blue*

*That it’s you I like, it’s you yourself*

*It’s you. It’s you I like.*<sup>54</sup>

But Rogers' stories — *our* stories — are complicated and simple, profane and divine, mythic and genuine. What is it that we expect from Mister Rogers? What do we want from our icons? Perhaps the best way to describe the transcendent nature of Fred Rogers is through story, told in story form by *Esquire's* Tom Junod in 1998.

Junod recounts a story Rogers told him about a visit with a very special 14-year-old boy. The boy had a serious case of cerebral palsy and had been abused by caretakers when he was younger. He was convinced that he was “bad” because of the things that had been done to him. Now when he was disturbed by something he would strike out at others and hit himself as well. He had to use a computer to communicate and would often say to his mother that he “didn't want to live any more, for he was sure that God didn't like what was inside him any more than he did.”

The boy had always watched Mister Rogers, however, even as a 14-year-old. On a trip to the West Coast, Rogers was asked to visit the youngster by a foundation designed to help children in need. When his mother told him that Mister Rogers was coming to see him, the youngster was very nervous. On the day that Rogers visited, the boy was so nervous that he began hitting himself and hurting himself. Rogers waited patiently while the boy's mother took him into another room to help him calm down. Rogers talked with the boy and then asked for a favor. As Junod reports, Rogers said, “I would like you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?” Although baffled by the request, the youngster said yes, via his computer. So Mister Rogers asked if the boy would pray for him. This time the boy was astonished. No one had ever asked for his prayers; he had always been prayed for. He finally told Rogers that he would try. According to the boy's mother, her son kept Mister Rogers in his prayers.

Later Junod complimented Rogers on his understanding of the needs of the young boy; of how asking for something gave that child a purpose as no one else had ever done. Rogers looked puzzled by Junod's assessment, then surprised. He said, “Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn't ask him for his prayers for him; I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his intercession.”<sup>55</sup>

So it is that Fred Rogers, Mister Rogers, reminds us once again of the complexity of the simple, of the deep and abiding nature of faith, of lines in *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* by William Wordsworth, “Not in entire forgetfulness, and not in utter nakedness, but trailing clouds of glory, do we come, from God who is our home.”

Essayist Brian Doyle once wrote:

**We are all storytellers, from our first garbled tales of mud and slugs to our last struggle to shape the words *I love you* in the holy cave of our mouths.... We are stories told in the brief light between great darkneses. In the best stories there is the silver sound of true things said directly, honestly, no fat, cutting to the core of what we are when we are at our best. There is an ancient shape of something true, something that twists up through tragedy and confusion, something true in and of all of us, something that makes us, occasionally, haltingly, holy. Something there is in us divine, and we touch it most and best by story. Once upon a time, we say, this happened to me, and here is the shape of what it means.”<sup>56</sup>**

*That* is Fred Rogers, writ large, writ small. Occasionally we are blessed, and one such blessing is Fred himself: the man **and** the icon. His story is our story, the best we have to offer. And **that** is the wonder of it all. Fred Rogers’ story isn’t that he was super-human, but that he was so human. We like our heroes to be strong, brave, unorthodox — until someone genuine and compassionate shows up in our living room every day and we ask, “What’s his story? What’s he really like?”, not because he’s so unlike us but because he is **so** us, awake to our best nature, our best stories, our best selves.

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