

Tribute to a Shining Star

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Very early on the morning of February 27, my husband Michael had turned on the television to check the weather, but when the T.V. came on, it was on PBS and a *Mister Rogers* episode was showing. We sat there and watched the last ten minutes of it before changing to the weather channel. *Mister Rogers* sang, "It's a good feeling to know you're alive," the first refrain of the good-bye song he sang at the end of every show. I said to Michael that Fred Rogers was the only television person I had ever experienced who seemed to transcend the screen—the way he moved, breathed, talked, was sometimes silent. There was a sense of integrity, sincerity, a warmth and love for the children that felt tangible. It was one of those serendipitous moments. Michael and I never turn on the television in the morning, let alone sit and watch *Mister Rogers*! Yet, that morning, only hours after he had passed away, there we were watching him not knowing that he had died.

The truth is that I have been and continue to be an advocate for television-free environments, or at the least, very limited television exposure for young children. Enough studies have been done to show that television is detrimental. One just needs to observe the children to see that that it is not just the content that is unhealthy for children, but is the medium itself.

Children deeply imitate whatever is around them so it is then easy to understand why we do not want them drinking in the electronic impulses of television, let alone the consumerism stimulated by the content. We had an almost T.V.-free household when our sons were young, but I did let them watch *Mister Rogers*. Why did I let my own children watch *Mister Rogers* and would probably do it again if they were little? Maybe the answer lies somewhere in Fred Rogers' biography. This excerpt is taken from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*:

"He was so genuinely, genuinely kind, a wonderful person," Newell said. "His mission was to work with families and

children for television. . . That was his passion, his mission, and he did it from day one." Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, . . . was ordained in 1963 with a charge to continue his work with children and families through television. Rogers composed his own songs for the show and began each episode in a set made to look like a comfortable living room, singing, "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood," as he donned sneakers and a zip-up cardigan. Off the set, Rogers was much like his television persona. He swam daily, read voraciously and listened to Beethoven. He once volunteered at a state prison in Pittsburgh and helped set up a playroom there for children visiting their parents. "I have really never considered myself a TV star," Rogers said in a 1995 interview. "I always thought I was a neighbor who just came in for a visit." His message to his viewers remained simple—love yourself and others.

"We live in a world in which we need to share responsibility," he said in 1994. "It's easy to say 'It's not my child, not my community, not my world, not my problem.' Then there are those who see the need and respond. I consider those people my heroes."

I know times have changed since my children were little, and even *Mister Rogers* materials have been marketed, particularly to the child care industry. There is even a *Mister Rogers* website with games for children to play. I find myself wondering if this was a continuation of his mission, an attempt to keep up with the times of what is happening in childhood. Could it be that Fred Rogers, knowing that the majority of children were going to be exposed to television and computers, tried in some way to lift their experience to a higher plane? I don't even know that it is possible to do such a thing. How transcendent is the human spirit?

Four years ago I had the privilege to hear Fred Rogers speak at the NAEYC Conference in Toronto. There were probably 25,000 people there, and it was slightly overwhelming. At last it was time for

Fred Rogers. You could have heard a pin drop. He approached the podium and stood for a moment looking out at all of us with a kind and gentle smile on his face. Then he spoke. "You know," he said, "when you stand before another human being, you stand in sacred space." I had heard what I needed to hear. This was why I let my sons watch Mister Rogers. He seemed to be able, even through the wretched medium of television, to create a sacred space.

I was sent a copy of several Rogers quotes. The person who had compiled them had written, "All children lost a friend with the death yesterday of Fred Rogers." Perhaps all children (and adults) have gained a heavenly friend—a true advocate for children who can inspire us more directly now. He no longer needs the television to reach out to the world. Here is Fred Rogers in his own words:

"If only you could sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to people you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person."

"What really matters is whether the alphabet is used for the declaration of war or for the description of a sunrise."

"The first four years of life are more important in the developing of a functioning human being than the first four years of college."

"I love whimsy, don't you? If you're going to be working for children, you need to do your best not to lose your childlikeness. It's wonderful to be able to just be yourself."

When asked what the greatest event in American history was, Fred Rogers responded, "I can't say. However, I suspect that like so many 'great' events, it was something very simple and very quiet with little or no fanfare (such as forgiving someone else for a deep hurt) which eventually changed the course of history. The really important 'great' things are never the center stage of life's drama. They're always 'in the wings.' That's why it's so essential for us to be mindful of the humble and the deep rather than the flashy and the superficial."

"All I know to do is to light the candle that has been given to me."

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