

A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

A Sermon by
Dottie Mathews, Assistant Minister

Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
2600 Philip Lane, P.O. Box 1791
Appleton, WI 54912-1791
(920) 731-0849
Website: www.fvuuf.org

August 27, 2006

READING: *from The Courage to Teach¹ by Parker J. Palmer*

“Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge – and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.”

“Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The methods used by these weavers vary widely. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts – meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self.” (pp. 2, 11)

SERMON:

I imagine some of you have come today wondering whatever possessed me to choose this nondescript character – a deceased minimalist

¹ Palmer, Parker J., *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers), 1998.

children's TV icon – as the centerpiece of a sermon. Well, let me just address your question right away. I chose to speak about this guy, Fred Rogers, because he means a lot to me – and I was reminded of that a few months back when a dear friend, a father of three children himself, out of the blue mailed me a book. There was no occasion, no good reason - just a gesture of friendship and warmth. The book was called, *Life's Journey According to Mister Rogers: Things to Remember Along the Way*². As I thumbed through the pages, I did remember -- how very important this guy was to me and my little family about two and a half decades ago.

I was married at a young age and my marriage broke up when I was 30 for several unquestionably wise reasons. For the most part, my children's father has not been a presence in their lives. So, even though our split was "right" yet, it was a very painful time for me and my children, who were, at that time, 6, 4 and 2 years old. My parents were both dead; I had (and I still have) close relationships with my siblings and they helped as they were able – but my own upbringing had been difficult in many ways so I honestly didn't have a lot of positive modeling on how to care for my little brood, especially at times when I was exhausted to the bone and feeling thoroughly un-creative. That I loved my kids to my core was never doubted, but I struggled with finding the gentleness and energy to be an effective parent as I tried to climb out of the dive my life plans had taken – as we all tried to find our ways (big and little) through this story that was not what any of us had envisioned for ourselves.

I'm not trying to tell you that Mister Rogers was my guru or primary source of strength for me through that time, but I can say that in some odd way, the calm, steady assuredness of his voice in the midst of all the chaos of those days was deeply comforting. And... I know we were not alone.

We lived in Los Angeles then – a very large city and a very difficult one to scrape by on little income. We didn't watch a lot of TV but his show was one of the few that we tried not to miss. When it was time we would turn it on and wait expectantly for our friend, Mister Rogers, whose smile would welcome us to his Neighborhood and invite us into his living room. And my three little ones and I would line with pillows or sit cross legged together on the floor and for a half hour, we were quiet and engaged – and learning from another adult the same sorts of lessons I was trying so hard to pass along: that the only way to find real happiness in life is to be ethical, and loving and kind human beings. And that sort of learning has to begin with appreciating and loving ourselves!

² Rogers, Fred, *Life's Journey According to Mister Rogers: Things to Remember Along the Way* (NY: Hyperion Books), 2005.

It was a bit of a mystery to me how he would catch their attention in ways that the other shows didn't. His mild, direct way of speaking modeled a type of parenting for me that I had not received. He showed absolute respect to every guest, regardless of whether their bodies were grown up or little, famous or dealing with disease or incapacities. In many ways, Fred Rogers seems like a western Dalai Lama for the young. Their messages are very much the same and he had a similar renowned, intentional, all-encompassing acceptance toward others that was evident even on his show.

When you look around TV land, even TV land from a quarter century ago, it is easy to misjudge his mild manner as weakness, easy to make fun of his perceived lack of strength, or to brush over his content as boring. But that would be quite an underassessment of this man's talent and convictions. And it is awfully hard to argue with the success he had.

He's been famously ridiculed in movies and on comedy shows like Saturday Night Live. But throughout the years, he never changed – never felt the need to defend his person or his show or change his style. He was doing what he loved and he loved making a difference in the world! That was his calling in life about which he had no question.

There is a wonderful quote by writer Frederick Buechner on the subject of vocations. Buechner defines one's vocation as the point where your heart's desire and the world's need meet. Without doubt, Mister Rogers' heart's desire was to combine his love of music, children, life itself and media to meet a monumental need of the world. He found a way to do all that and live out his message of love and acceptance [and, by the way, he started preaching that message far before tolerance and diversity were such well appreciated terms in children's education] from when he began in the 1960's until very recently. His was the longest running show on Public TV at the time of his retirement in 2001 and even then he went on to do public speaking until his brief illness and death in 2003.

We often hear about people who are able to turn the difficulties of their own lives into good for others, and his is such a story. Fred was (by his own report) a sickly, shy, and overweight child who was often unable to play outside. From his self description, he was probably the type of kid that bullies taunted. One summer due to health issues, he spent all day, every day, indoors and the result was that his "Neighborhood" was born. Having no siblings in the house yet and being unable to go outside, out of his loneliness, he created a world of make believe where he wrote elaborate stories about fantasy kingdoms and talking animals – many of which survived to eventually find their way into his show.

Mister Rogers believed that the lessons he learned during his sometimes-difficult childhood were lessons commonly needed in children's lives and so he used his medium to become a teacher. Like our opening reading by Parker Palmer, Mister Rogers brought his full, most authentic, self to this task, on his show, in his books, and in every public appearance. Whether in front of a camera or the graduating class at Marquette University, Mister Rogers was unpretentiously Mister Rogers: a reverent, inviting learner and appreciator of life.

He wasn't so interested in teaching numbers and letters and those kinds of things – although he was a big promoter of education – but he saw his mission in life was to teach small, growing, people, and their parents, and anyone else watching, to value the wonder and gift of life and to do all one can to make our world a place where others can learn to appreciate their lives too.

Why, I wonder, is this thing of self-appreciation, self-acceptance so darn hard for children.....and teens.....and adults? With all the practice we've had at being human, you'd think we'd begin to catch on better by now! People can make fun of the simplicity of Fred Rogers' message but, if it were really believed, the self-help section at Barnes & Noble would be wiped out! He felt - and I don't disagree - that the LACK of self-acceptance, in the myriad ways it surfaces, is central to nearly all human conflict.

Yet, persistently and pervasively, this thing of finding compassion for ourselves is SUCH a tough nut to crack. Underneath, so many of us are just longing to know that we are, indeed, enough, just as we are. **Why** is that such a struggle? When did we begin to be taught that we're insufficient to the task of life? It would be a very rare parent, indeed, who would set out to teach inadequacy. Yet, it's almost universally learned! So many of us, when we feel safe enough, speak of worrying that our covers are going to be pulled, that in the next complicated assignment or parenting challenge or new group setting, someplace, sometime soon, everyone will finally discover just how incompetent we truly are!

I've spoken with extremely successful people who secretly fear (in fact are nearly certain) that all their accomplishment has only been the result of happenstance and that if everyone knew the true level of their ignorance, they would be demoted, transferred, or at the very least ridiculed or shunned. I wish for all of us that we could internalize Mister Rogers' message and, perhaps, as that self-acceptance deepened, we, too, could devote at least some part of ourselves to helping others learn to love themselves as well.

In my research of Mister Rogers, I could not find negative comments by anyone toward him. His staff, family, colleagues, everyone seemed to agree that this fellow was genuinely the type of man that he appeared: a pure heart who knew that even one's foibles and imperfections could be used to serve the common good. He did that, and he somehow managed to remain liked by all.

Well, there was one person who found him offensive. It was the Rev. Fred Phelps. You know, the minister whose group pickets funerals seemingly to relish what they see as the evidence of God's wrath pouring out in events like the death of soldiers or the destruction of hurricanes. His followers see these as the fury of God over the graciousness of the United States toward homosexuality. If you can believe it, Phelps' crew did picket Mr. Rogers' funeral and their reason is one that probably made the Rogers family feel quite gratified. Phelps claimed that because his message was one of love and acceptance, and because Mister Rogers never belittled or judged others, the lessons he taught would mean that if one were homosexual, that would be OK. In an interview, Rev. Phelps said "he's one of the foremost proponents of 'It's OK to be Gay.'.... You've got a guy (Mr. Rogers) who has got millions of children's ears and he says he's gonna shoot straight to them about the weighty matters of life, death, divorce -- and then he steps gingerly around [that]."³

Well, although I don't know of any time Mister Rogers made public pronouncements about anyone's sexuality, it is very true that in the Neighborhood, the "weighty matters" of life were dealt with - complicated "adult" issues like war, racism, illness, death, abandonment, fear were regularly discussed in uncomplicated terms that evidenced the writers' appreciation for the fact that children – even very small children – are capable of processing very deep questions and holding complexities beyond what many give them credit for. Mr. Rogers valued children, just as they are!

To my thought, it is a pity that sometimes children are seen as valuable primarily because they are viewed as potential adults. We are sometimes reminded to nurture them because they are the future. And while that's not an untruth – but they are also full spiritual beings NOW – at whatever age and stage of maturation they are, and they do hold questions on these "weighty matters" that beg for discussion with trustworthy adult

³ Interview with A. J. Daulerio, April 2, 2003. Available online at <http://www.blacktable.com/daulerio030401.htm>.

people. It is crucially important and sacred work that happens, ideally, in our homes, of course, but also in the car as we're transporting our kids' and their friends, and in the bleachers at games, wherever we are, we are all being opportunities as teachers of one another in all settings, formal and informal.

You can also consider that a sincere plug for RE teachers. This work is not holy babysitting. Religious Education is not about preparing children for the eventual development of their spiritual lives. Of course, it changes and evolves through experience and gaining of knowledge over the years, but engaging children in spiritual practices and conversation is something we should not shy away from. It is profound work, holding the trusting souls of children and encouraging them to see themselves as beautiful, deserving and cherished creatures of the earth. Mr. Rogers wrote in his book, "You are a very special person. There is only one like you in the whole world. There's never been anyone exactly like you before, and there never will be again. Only you. And people can like you exactly as you are."

So, in that regard, Rev. Phelps was probably right. I can only imagine that if someone had "come out" to Mister Rogers, he may well have smiled and commented "I like you just the way you are!" This, to me, is also said (perhaps with a bit more flair) in our first Unitarian Universalist principle "we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Phelps didn't mean to, I'm sure, but his action only reinforced that Mister Rogers' message had gotten through.

But it's a message that he had to repeat in words and puppetry and song for nearly forty years. This task of accepting ourselves and others, of seeing each and every one of us as worthy and capable beings, knowing that we ARE enough, is a hard won lesson. This man devoted his life to helping others hear it, and he definitely made his mark on the world.

Walking with his spirit as I have over recent weeks has really made me renew my own conviction to honor that message – to pay attention to the times that an inner voice tries to tell me the opposite. To listen supportively when others express their own feelings of "not-enough-ness" so that, perhaps, as we each find our way to greater, genuine self-acceptance (and I am not speaking of ego here, that's something very different) but GENUINE self acceptance, we can be more and more use toward the ceaseless task of building a better world.

Fred Rogers was a Christian who trained for the Presbyterian seminary prior to going into TV. But, given his constant inclusiveness, I think he'd find great meaning in this closing from the Eastern Wisdom of the Tao Te Ching. This might have been his credo:

*Some say that my teaching is nonsense.
Others call it lofty but impractical.
But to those who have looked inside themselves,
this nonsense makes perfect sense.
And to those who put it into practice,
this loftiness has roots that go deep.*

*I have just three things to teach:
simplicity, patience, compassion.
These three are your greatest treasures.
Simple in actions and in thoughts,
you return to the source of being.
Patient with both friends and enemies,
you accord with the way things are.
Compassionate toward **yourself**,
you reconcile all beings in the world.⁴*

May we live in such compassion this day and all days. May it be so.

⁴ Mitchell, Stephen, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, (NY: HarperCollins), 1998, #67. [emphasis mine]