

Mister Rogers

Supplementary Article Week 1

Chris and I walked down Hollywood Boulevard, scanning names on the sidewalk stars. Tom Cruise. Jack Nicholson. Johnny Cash. Meryl Streep. Leonardo DiCaprio, ABBA. Julia Roberts. Star after star, honoring the careers of film, TV, and music celebrities. And then I spotted the star I'd been searching for and posed for a picture beside it.

Fred Rogers. My hero.

Today the legacy of Fred Rogers lives on through the animated children's program Daniel Tiger, which I enjoy watching with my grandson Preston. But when I was a child, Fred Rogers appeared on the program Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, which aired daily on public television. If you are old enough to remember the program, you most likely recall how each episode began and can probably sing the opening tune.

A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Piano music begins, and Fred Rogers walks through the door with a smile and a wave, singing the theme song, "It's a beautiful Day in the neighborhood". His solo continues as he descends a short flight of stairs to the closet, where he exchanges his suit coat for a zip-up sweater. Then he sits on a bench, removes his dress shoes, and laces up his sneakers. With the wardrobe change complete, he finishes the opening number with the invitation, "won't you be, won't you be, please won't you be my neighbor?"

This is how Fred McFeely Rogers opened his program for thirty-three years. Between 1968 and 2001, he embraced the redundancy of walking through the door and singing the same opening number while swapping out his dress coat and shoes for more casual attire.

So why the repetition? Why the same pattern day after day, week after week, year after year? I mean, wouldn't you grow bored, say, after maybe eight years of this? Now double that to sixteen years. Now double again to thirty-two years and you're closing in on the length of time Fred Rogers repeated his opening sequence. Why would anyone choose such a tedious daily routine?

I suspect Fred Rogers re-enacted his daily rhythm to model consistency. Many of his young viewers came from homes marked by structure and order. You know, homes where alarm clocks were set, breakfast was made, the dog was fed, and everyone dutifully went off to work or school. Later the grown-ups came home from work to make dinner, help with homework, and shuffle the kids off to bed. Daily order, Routine. Consistency.

Other viewers, however, knew little consistency or dependability. They came from homes marked instead by chaos and disruption, with no semblance of stability or predictable routine. I wonder if Fred Rogers served as the most dependable presence in many of these kids' lives by modeling his day-to-day consistency. Hang up your coat when you take it off. Tie your shoes when you put them on. We can employ certain rhythms and patterns and practices repetitively to make life work well. Fred Rogers modeled this through the daily rituals of his program.

Mister Rogers embodied dependability. He was faithfully present. His ministered, week in and week out, for an astounding thirty-three years. I do believe *ministered* is the appropriate word to describe his impact. Fred Rogers was ordained by the Presbyterian Church to serve families through the medium of television. He donned the wardrobe of a servant each time he pulled on his sweater and laced up his shoes.

He believed the world was not a safe place and that children would discover this soon enough, experiencing the dark emotions of fear, loneliness, and grief. They needed a neighbor to help them process life. Fred Rogers devoted himself to being that neighbor- consistently, faithfulness, dependably there.

THE LEGACY

The life work of my hero, Fred Rogers, did not go unnoticed. His program attracted musical guests such as Yo-Yo Ma and Wynton Marsalis.

- Mister Rogers' Neighborhood was honored with four Daytime Emmy awards.
- In 1997 he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences
- He was inducted into the Television Hall of Fame in 1999.
- In 2002, the year before his death, he was awarded with the highest civilian award an American can receive, The Presidential Medal of Freedom.

And for what? No slick computer imagine, no astounding graphics. We're talking sock puppets, my friends, with Rogers playing many of the parts himself. He also wrote and preformed most of the music for the program, which was simple and melody and lyrics.

Why all the accolades and awards then? I believe they were a result of his passionate commitment over an extended period of time. For years, he poured himself into the program with love, skill and grace. Rogers harnessed the power of thinking small. His greatness rose from redundant faithfulness. He summoned creative energy for routine tasks. And he did it for decades.

PASSIONATE LONGEVITY

I believe we can glean a major life lesson from the commitment of Fred Rogers. It deals with passionate longevity- not merely hanging around for a long time, but genuinely bringing out best selves to people for a sustained stretch of time. Life impact takes time.

It takes time to build trust.

It takes time to refine a skill set.

It takes time to build a solid reputation.

Don't miss the challenge embedded in the type of life influence I'm describing here. We generally don't leave our mark by lunging from one stunning achievement to the next. Much of our forward motion isn't all that interesting when viewed from day to day. It's only through weighing the collective sum of these repeated moments that such a life presses its profound imprint on the lives of others.

To what and to whom are *you* deeply committed? Far too many of us don't know. We dabble or flit from one interest to the next. From church to church, from job to job, and maybe from spouse to spouse. We quickly lose interest, or patience, and fly to the next new thing. Someday and somewhere, though, we'll need to land. We'll need to find our calling and then start doing the slow and steady work of building a legacy. Big dreams are only powerful when anchored in daily discipline. Dream big, think small. Be faithful in the ordinary again and again. And trust God to work in extraordinary ways if and when he chooses. Commit yourself to acts of daily service, and trust God with the results.

I'LL BE BACK

At the conclusion of each program Mister Rogers reversed the steps enacted in the introduction, putting on his street shoes and suit jacket and singing a closing number. His closing song changed over time, but in the later years of the program he sang,

And Ill be back, when the day is new

And I'll have more ideas for you

And you'll have things you want to talk about.

I will too.

Those four words –“And I'll be back”- typified his thirty-three-year run. He was back. Day after day. Week after week. Month after month. Decade after decade. He was a dependable, faithful neighbour.

To what and to whom are you deeply committed?