



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Learning from Fred Rogers

He ran a children's show different from any other, in that instead of trying to entertain the kids, he talked to them about things that mattered. He looked directly into the camera and spoke as if there were just one child listening. A Presbyterian minister who became a tv producer, writer and star, he was the same humble, gentle and loving person off the screen as he was on. He wrote over 200 songs for his show, and most of the show's characters, like Daniel Tiger, Lady Elaine and King Friday, represented either aspects of his own personality or those of his family members. And he used them to help him reach out, teach and strengthen the hearts of millions of children over almost 40 years. Who am I talking about?

I am sure many of you saw or heard about this year's documentary film, called "Won't You Be My Neighbor." Fred Rogers was primarily the creator of a children's show. But the things he taught to children are some of the most important lessons any of us can learn for our lives.

One of the many incisive observations that have been made about "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" – and perhaps the reason it can teach all of us so much – is that he treated children as whole human beings, able to take in complex truths and emotions. He discussed on his show everything from getting dressed, of course, to watching your parents get divorced, or from why you shouldn't be afraid of the bathroom drain, or of getting a haircut, to how to respond to the most terrible events like those of 9/11, which happened two years before he died. This basic feature of Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood teaches us that anything can be talked about, and probably should.

Think about the conversations you have had in your life that you were unsure about or reluctant to begin. Do you regret them? Or did they move you to a better place? I wondered how Fred Rogers felt the morning he prepared to talk about divorce with children on tv. I would have been nervous that a child of divorced parents watching would be filled with bad feelings, or that a parent would think this was an intrusion into their personal family life. Then I watched the scene. Mr. Rogers says to Mr. McFeely, the deliveryman, "Sometimes people get married and after a while they're so unhappy with each other that they don't want to be married anymore." He continues to the camera, "I know a little girl and a little boy, whose mother and father got divorced, and those children cried and cried. You know why? Well, one reason was that they thought it was all their fault. But of course it wasn't their fault."

In the middle of Mr. Rogers' reflection, Mr. McFeely abruptly makes an excuse and leaves. Mr. Rogers explains to the children, "I guess that's something he doesn't like

to talk about.” As adults, we tend to shy away from some subjects, maybe for good reasons: there are times that talking about a difficult issue only makes things worse. But most of the time, it’s not talking that does damage. As a parent, I feel I’m still in the easy stage – my seven and eight year old children are ready to talk about almost anything they are thinking or feeling. But my friends with older children tell me, just wait. As my kids get older, fear of judgment, of saying the wrong thing, or fear of feelings themselves will begin to get in the way. I know that I will need to find strategies to help my kids open up.

The prayers of the *Yamim Noraim* are designed to get us talking about the difficult things that have happened over the last year. We recite in unison the many ways that some of us may have transgressed or been injured, in hopes that we will be emboldened to go deeper in conversation with the people in our lives. A favorite Jewish teaching of mine is of a rabbi with an unusual way of dealing with being hurt. He would make an effort to stand near the person he needed to forgive, hoping that his proximity would lead them into a dialogue that they both might rather avoid. Perhaps every one of us is avoiding some of those conversations, conversations that would clear up a misplaced sense of guilt or anger, would reaffirm feelings of caring and support, would allow emotions that have been festering to be exposed and dissipated. I imagine the relief so many children must have felt to hear Mr. Rogers tell them their parents’ separation wasn’t their fault.

Groups at the temple have found many ways to talk with each other – book groups, Torah study on Shabbat mornings, the wonderful Rodef Reads program that we have done together in the last year. For a few years now, several groups at the Temple have been studying together using the traditional method known as *Mussar*, which literally means moral discipline, but one sage called it “the science of inner life.” We talk about traits like honesty, humility and patience. The methods of *Mussar* include journaling and meditation, but my experience has been that many of our students just come for the chance to talk about these qualities, and how hard it is to consistently practice them. One parent might need to reflect out loud about all the feelings that get stirred up when their child won’t listen to them. Another needs to be reminded that practicing humility doesn’t always mean putting yourself last. I have learned from teaching these classes how much more most of us need to talk about what is happening in our lives and relationships.

Fear of disagreement is another reason we avoid talking. I can relate to this dilemma as a member of the clergy. Sometimes my colleagues and I raise difficult issues here on the bema, including political ones. You might not always agree with us. We believe that we have to talk about such issues as a community. To ignore them would be to make the same mistake that Fred Rogers was trying to remedy – that by not speaking about complex issues that matter in our lives and our society, we leave them to fester and we shy away from our responsibility to act. This is why next week at the Yom Kippur afternoon discussion hour, we will talk about the new Israeli Nation State Law and the tension between affirming Jewish statehood and ensuring an equal and inclusive society for the 25 percent of Israeli citizens who are

not Jewish. It's why I will speak in my sermon on Yom Kippur about our work for criminal justice reform, the terrible injustices that need our attention, and the ways this work can build up our relationships with our neighbors. Our willingness to deal together with difficult issues is understandably at times a source of discomfort. At the same time, I am convinced that these conversations are vital, are meaningful, and help us to make our Judaism truly relevant to the struggles of our time.

The question, "Won't you be my neighbor," is a bit unusual. The truth is, we don't generally choose our neighbors. My family moved a year ago to a quiet cul-de-sac. Our kids play all the time with the others on the block. We still hardly know any of the adults on our street, but we do appreciate every family that came over, knocked on the door and welcomed us. It's a little thing, but it means a lot to feel that you are wanted in your neighborhood. That's easy for many of us, but not for everyone.

In the show, Mr. Rogers invites every person he meets into his neighborhood, from the deliveryman, to the local police officer, to the handyman and the janitor. I also read that journalists who interviewed Fred Rogers were frequently surprised that he then sought them out as friends. A man who once drove him in a limo to a PBS executive's home recalls that Fred Rogers insisted on bringing him in as extra guest for dinner, instead of letting him wait outside. On the ride home, he asked if they could stop at the driver's house. He played the piano and talked with the man's family late into the night, giving them what the driver said was one of the best nights of his life.

This message is not about socializing with your neighbors. Certainly, we should be inspired by Fred Rogers' openness to everyone. We can reflect on how that fits into our own growth this year. But there is also an essential societal lesson in this aspect of "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood." It's about whether we are open when it counts. Those who saw the film will remember that Fred Rogers took a courageous stand. In 1968, during the first year of his show, he brought on a new cast member, Francois Clemmons, the first African American to hold a recurring role on a children's series. And that role was, among all things, a police officer: a black police officer, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and four months after the assassination of Dr. King. Clemmons was initially uncomfortable taking this role because of his own view of the police, but he agreed, and his beautiful singing voice became an important part of the show.

The next year, the two of them took on the issue of racial discrimination at swimming pools. Even today, swimming pools are an intimate setting where prejudice against black neighbors can be at its worst. In 1969, when this issue was a subject of national debate, Mr. Rogers takes his viewers out to the garden on a hot day, fills a plastic tub with water, and starts to cool his feet. Officer Clemmons walks by, and Mr. Rogers invites him to come over and rest his feet in the water with him. Francois Clemmons recalled this later in appreciation, saying, "The icon Fred Rogers not only was showing my brown skin in the tub with his white skin as two friends,

but as I was getting out of that tub, he was helping me dry my feet." This simple act should not have required great courage to do on tv. But, it did.

Fifty years later, this is still the kind of neighborly act that is required of us. We are commanded, *V'ahavtah l'rei'echa kamocho*, to love your neighbor as yourself. Love is hard to define and perhaps impossible to regulate, but "as yourself" is more clear. It tells us that neighbors are to be treated as equals, to be welcomed just as we are welcomed, and given the same privileges and the same reception that we would expect for ourselves. There's another way I like to interpret this commandment. The word *kamocho* doesn't necessarily mean "as yourself." Literally, it means "like you." We are commanded to remember all the ways that our neighbor is like us – to strive not to see them as different, or on the outside.

When our friends at the McLean Islamic Center needed a space to hold their Ramadan services, we welcomed them into the temple, and when they purchased their former church building and made it their mosque, we showed up at the public hearing to say that in our view, these neighbors were just like us. Aside from traffic concerns, MIC faced the same difficulty that mosques across the country face: being seen as a stranger and a threat. I hope and believe that Fairfax County would have approved their building without our support. But the tensions of those months did force them to agree to severely limit their parking lot use, so much so that they cannot have more than 10 cars in their lot to attend morning services. They have had to cancel the morning service altogether, because this is so unmanageable. They are now applying for a modest relief from these limits, and in three weeks, they have asked me to attend another hearing and testify to their value in the community. You are invited to join me again in supporting them, and in helping them to feel welcomed, accepted and wanted in our neighborhood.

We, as Americans and as Jews, also have a special obligation towards our newest neighbors in this country. Last May, I was asked to stand with a small group of clergy and support a family in trouble. The mother had broken two laws: entering the US illegally 12 years ago, and a minor traffic violation. Every year, she had to check in with ICE, and each year she had been allowed to stay. This time, her children watched as she was detained. She was deported a few weeks later. I'd never been a witness to that kind of experience. Now, she and her husband have to decide whether their children, who are American citizens, should live with her in El Salvador, where they won't be safe, or with him, as he works two jobs in Falls Church. On October 18, the Temple will present a panel of local and national experts on the struggles facing immigrants today and on what we can do.

While Fred Rogers had the courage to address even controversial issues, his work was essentially personal, aimed at strengthening our sense of ourselves. In one beautiful musical scene on the show, Young Daniel the tiger tells Lady Aberlin he has a question about mistakes, and we assume he's talking about a mistake he's made. Then, Daniel says, "I've been wondering if I was a mistake." He says he looks different from other tigers, and he wonders if he's too tame. (*singing*) "Sometimes I

wonder if I'm a mistake, I'm not like anyone else I know. When I'm asleep or even awake, sometimes I get to dreaming that I'm just a fake – I'm not like anyone else.”

Lady Aberlin responds to Daniel with her own refrain, singing, “I think you’re just fine as you are.” It’s heartwarming, and it’s sad. Too many kids feel they’re a mistake: they should be smarter, prettier, or better in some way. The truth is, so do many of us at any age. The most insightful part the song is that even as Lady Aberlin reassures Daniel, he repeats his questions over her, as if he doesn’t hear, showing us how hard these doubts are to silence.

I believe we need to listen closely. This message is essential for how to love children, partners, friends and everyone else, and how to help them flourish. Fred Rogers once said: “I don’t think anyone can grow unless he’s loved exactly as he is now, appreciated for what he is rather than what he will be.”

This message is especially helpful on Rosh Hashanah. It would be easy to feel today that we are flawed, needing to be fixed. But that’s not the message of these holy days. We use the prayers, and this time with our loved ones and community, to hold our shortcomings up to the light, knowing we will be forgiven, accepted, and loved. We use them to open us up and help us talk about our lives. And we use them to bring us closer in relationship, to remember the things we all have in common, and to become better neighbors.