

Peaceful Neighbor

Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers

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WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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First edition

Published by Westminster John Knox Press
Louisville, Kentucky

15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Book design by Drew Stevens

Cover design by designpointinc.com

Cover art: Fred Rogers during a May 27, 1993, taping of his show Mister Rogers Neighborhood in Pittsburgh; © Gene J. Puskar/AP Photo

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Long, Michael G.

Peaceful neighbor : discovering the countercultural Mister Rogers / Michael G. Long. — First edition.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-664-26047-7 (pbk.)

1. Rogers, Fred—Religion. I. Title.

PN1992.4.R56L66 2015

791.4502'8092—dc23

2014031602

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992

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War isn't nice.

—Fred Rogers

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction: Just the Way He Was: Meeting the Real Mister Rogers	xi
Part One: War and Peace in the Neighborhood	
1. “Isn’t Peace Wonderful?”: Against the Vietnam War, for Gandhi	3
2. “War Isn’t Nice”: Against the Arms Race, for Peaceful Imagination	9
3. “I Like You”: Against the Cold War, for Puppet Détente	21
4. “Just the Way You Are”: A Theology of Peace	27
5. “It’s Okay to Be Angry”: A Psychology of Peace	45
6. “A Gross Form of Abuse”: From the Persian Gulf War to the War on Terror	63
Part Two: Peace as More Than the Absence of War	
7. “A Black Brother”: Race and Diversity	81
8. “Food for the World”: Tears for Hungry Children	99
9. “I’m Tired of Being a Lady”: Tough Girls, Sensitive Boys	119
10. “He Understood”: Homosexuality and Gay Friends	143
11. “I Love Tofu Burgers and Beets”: Animals and Mothers	157
12. “Take Care of This Wonderful World”: Peace on Earth	169
Conclusion: The Compassion of Fred Rogers	177
Notes	183
Index	197

Introduction

Just the Way He Was: Meeting the Real Mister Rogers

Fred Rogers was concerned. Ellen Goodman, a syndicated columnist for the *Boston Globe*, had just criticized one of his public service announcements for preschool children during the Persian Gulf War. “Mr. Rogers decided to make a special public service announcement to anxious children that ‘you’ll always have someone to love you, no matter what,’” she’d written. “But the dateline of his report is the Kingdom of Make Believe.”¹

The words stung, but rather than simply stewing, Rogers took to the pen, as he often did, writing Goodman a heartfelt response. “Having been an appreciative reader of your excellent work for years, I was concerned when I read the column in which you ‘clicked’ our public service announcement for preschool children in this horrendous world crisis,” he wrote.

Rogers did not launch at Goodman, but he did feel the need to explain his actions, gently but firmly, so she might better understand. “When PBS asked if I would speak about conflict to families of preschoolers, my first reaction was not to do anything about the war in this medium which seemed to broadcast nonstop the ‘Scud v. Patriot Show,’” he offered. “But then I started to hear more and more about young children’s fears, and I prayed for the inspiration to do something helpful.”

Rogers added that the result of his prayers, the PSAs Goodman criticized, echoed his earlier work in another time of crisis. After the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and Robert Kennedy, he had written and taped a program in which he asked families to include their children in the grieving process. “Our country was in mass mourning,” he explained. “It was then that I realized more fully how speaking the truth about feelings—even on television—could be exceedingly curative.”

So in spite of his initial reticence, Rogers accepted the invitation from PBS by doing what he did best—speaking directly to children and their families about their hopes and fears. He summed it up for Goodman:

Even though I don't make policy in this country, I do feel an obligation to give the best I know how to families with young children when policies (of government and television) are affecting those families so directly. That's why I agreed to do anything at all. I lament for the world (not the Neighborhood of Make-Believe!) because the abuses of war breed abusers who grow up to sow the seeds of future wars. Anything I can do to bring a modicum of comfort to a little one, I will do. (How I would love for my 2½-year-old grandson to be able to grow up in a world which refuses to abuse its children!) Even though I felt helpless in some ways (because of the onset of the war), I was grateful (as I imagine you must be at times) to have an avenue in which to express the truth as I felt it for the children I've always tried to serve.

But it wasn't just gratitude that Rogers was feeling as he finished his letter. "You can imagine my grief," he wrote in a postscript, "when I think of the many 20+-year-old men and women on 'active duty' in this war who grew during their earliest years with our 'Neighborhood' program. How I long for them to be able to come back here and live the rest of their lives in peace."²

Fred Rogers was a pacifist. He was not a Navy Seal sniper with thirty confirmed kills during the Vietnam War. Nor was he an accomplished Marine who sought to hide his death-dealing skills by presenting himself as a kind and gentle soul. Although it's easy to find these crazed claims on the Internet, the real truth is that Rogers's spiritual beliefs led him to oppose all wars as well as all barriers to individual and social peace.

Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister, and although he rarely shared his religious convictions on his program, he fervently believed in a God who accepts us as we are and loves us without condition, who is present in each person and all of creation, and who desires a world marked by peace and wholeness. With this progressive spirituality as his inspiration, Rogers fashioned his children's program as a platform for sharing countercultural beliefs about caring nonviolently for one another, animals, and the earth.

We don't typically think of Rogers as a radical, no doubt partly because he didn't appear that way: His voice was gentle, his body was vulnerable, his hair was in place. He wore colorful, comfortable, soft sweaters made by his mother. Nor do we usually imagine him as a pacifist; that adjective seems way too political to ascribe to the host of a children's program known for its focus on feelings.

In a very real sense, we've domesticated Fred Rogers and his radical pacifism. We've restricted him to the realm of entertainment, children, and feelings, and we've ripped him out of his political and religious context.

The most popular YouTube video of Rogers—with over 10 million views—is a remix created for PBS Digital Studios by the mash-up artist John D. Boswell.³ The fun and engaging piece shows Rogers singing a lovely song about growing ideas in our minds. But there’s no hint anywhere in the video that, for Rogers, our ideas would do well to include really radical thoughts—such as imagining the Persian Gulf War as a form of child abuse.

Another YouTube video—this one with over 2 million views—shows Rogers appearing at a 1969 U.S. Senate hearing on cutting the proposed budget for the newly formed Corporation for Public Broadcasting.⁴ The video is powerful and compelling because Rogers uses slow and gentle language to persuade a fast-talking, slick, and rough-and-tumble senator, John Pastore of Rhode Island, to reinstate funds President Nixon wanted to cut. What the 2 million viewers don’t learn from the video is that in the late 1960s, Rogers used his program to offer a counter voice to Nixon’s conduct of the Vietnam War and his concerted effort to depict poor people as lazy and subversive of the American work ethic.

Still another wildly popular video of Rogers attracts hundreds of thousands of views every time there is a violent crisis in the United States, especially those involving school shootings. In the emotionally gripping clip, Rogers tells us that looking for “the helpers” in violent situations can comfort us and provide us with a sense of hope.⁵ But the backstory to the video is that Rogers made it during the War on Terror, and that he was deeply opposed to President George W. Bush’s violent response to terrorism—points left unknown to the viewers watching the decontextualized clip.

The popular image of Fred Rogers, as depicted in these videos and many other places, separates him from his faith-fueled pacifism and progressive politics as well as from the historical context in which he shared his treasured convictions. The result is that Rogers often appears benign, anemic, even “namby-pamby,” as the late folk singer Pete Seeger once described him.⁶

Rogers disliked that image of himself—especially when he sensed it in parodies served up by Johnny Carson on *The Tonight Show* and Eddie Murphy on *Saturday Night Live*. “I’ve told Johnny that I like humor as much as anybody,” Rogers stated in 1983. “But what concerns me is the takeoffs that make me seem so wimpy! I hope it doesn’t communicate that Mr. Rogers is just somebody to be made fun of. Only people who take the time to see our work can begin to understand the depth of it.”⁷

The purpose of this book is to take Fred Rogers and his Neighborhood seriously. And why not? For more than three decades, *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* was a “national powerhouse” that reached more than 3.5 million

viewers weekly.⁸ Nielsen ratings indicate that at certain points, the number of viewers even ran as high as 9 million people a week. While the program's target audience was children ages two to five, its viewers also included countless siblings, parents, and grandparents, to the point that Rogers became a national icon by the time of his death in 2003. Ongoing sales of his program and books, coupled with online views of him and his work, suggest he remains a beloved figure more than a decade after his untimely death from stomach cancer.

Discovering the real—and radical—Fred Rogers requires setting aside the video clips and the parodies. For me, it demanded suspending my own initial point of entrance into the life and legacy of Fred Rogers. Because I was at the back end of his target audience by the time his program went national in 1968, I did not spend my childhood years watching *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. But I did eventually grow to be a huge fan of *Saturday Night Live*, and if truth be told, my first significant encounter with Mister Rogers was through Eddie Murphy's hilarious character "Mister Robinson."

It was thus quite an eye-opening experience, as if I was meeting him for the first time, when I began to dig through his papers at the Fred Rogers Archive at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pennsylvania; to read his speeches at the Mister Rogers' Neighborhood Archive at the University of Pittsburgh; to study numerous episodes of the national run of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (1968–2001); to listen to the many interviews he gave; and to talk with people who knew him well. Here, at last, was the Fred Rogers far beyond the comedy sketches of *Saturday Night Live*.

What I found, much to my delight, was a quiet but strong American prophet who, with roots in progressive spirituality, invited us to make the world into a countercultural neighborhood of love—a place where there would be no wars, no racial discrimination, no hunger, no gender-based discrimination, no killing of animals for food, and no pillaging of the earth's precious resources. This is the Fred Rogers I have come to know: not a namby-pamby, mealy-mouthed, meek and mild pushover, but rather an ambitious, hard-driving, and principled (though imperfect) creator of a progressive children's program designed to subvert huge parts of the wider society and culture.

That's right. Rogers was politically subversive—and stubbornly so. Of course, this is not the figure many of us typically remember celebrating as a national icon. We normally recall an angelic figure hovering above the dirtiness of politics and culture, smiling tenderly at our spellbound children, and speaking to them ever so peacefully. But, as he told Goodman, Rogers sometimes felt obliged to address public policy issues when they negatively affected the children and families who comprised his viewing audience.

Although he was deeply engaged in politics and culture, Rogers was well aware of his personal and professional limitations in addressing public policy. As he conceded to Goodman, he well understood that he was not a policymaker who could craft legislation or sign executive decrees to eliminate war and its abuse of children. But he also realized he could use his own particular bully pulpit to shape the moral character of his viewers and extol certain virtues and practices subversive of public policies that enshrined violence, discrimination, and injustice.

That's exactly what he did, and not just with public service announcements. Rogers hinted at this in his letter to Goodman when he noted that he did not lament for the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Rogers did not have to lament for Make-Believe, with its colorful mix of puppets and adults, or for the "real" neighborhood in which his television house was situated, because he created both as provinces within the peaceable kingdom he desired for humanity and all of creation.

While it's true that many of his shows "tackled the fears and the sadnesses of childhood," they also focused on the politics of violence and injustice—a fact that becomes all the clearer when we study them in their historical context.⁹ Indeed, his television neighborhood and the Neighborhood of Make-Believe are virtual oases of peace and justice in a violent and unjust world. But they're more than that, too; they're plain and simple invitations for his viewers to adopt the virtues and practices of peace and justice as they negotiate a world that conquers and kills so much.¹⁰ *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, it turns out, is far from sappy, sentimental, and shallow. It's a sharp political response to a civil and political society poised to kill, a fact that will surprise all those elites who dismiss him as a lightweight not worthy of critical engagement.

Rogers also extended his peaceable invitation through numerous sermons, prayers, speeches, letters, books, and interviews, understanding all this countercultural work as part and parcel of his vocation as a Presbyterian minister—a minister called to embody and enact the unconditional and expansive love of God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, Rogers sought to ensure that his work of creating peacemakers was a faithful continuation of the ministry of Jesus—an ongoing effort to create the peaceful and just reign of God on earth.

As a Christian peacemaker, Rogers understood Jesus to be the nonviolent love of God incarnate, and he turned to the life of Jesus for concrete guidance about ways to create the peaceable kingdom right here and now. As he put this in a 1979 letter to a friend, "What a tough job to try to communicate the gift of Jesus Christ to anybody. It can't be simply talked about, can it?

Jesus himself used parables—so I guess that’s our directive: try to show the kingdom of God through stories as much as possible.”¹¹

Hence, Rogers’s bully pulpit wasn’t really about bullying at all. He fashioned his program and outside engagements as opportunities to tell compelling and inviting stories about peace and justice. Fred Rogers was a storytelling peacemaker, and a powerful one at that.¹² His activism, at once militant and gentle, came to expression not through making policy, marching in the streets, or rallying in the squares, but in the stories he shared on his program and in other public venues. By turns affectionate and comical, poignant and provocative, these stories—a major subject in this book—came straight from a heart concerned for the underprivileged, oppressed, and wounded.

Rogers was also a Zen-like peacemaker. His personal and professional style, especially as revealed on his program, demonstrated a deep appreciation not only for quiet storytelling but also for slow pacing and the sounds of silence—those moments when “inner turbulence can settle.”¹³ The slow way he talked, the careful transitions he made from his “real” television neighborhood to Make-Believe, the silence he insisted on—all this gave us a model for *being* peace.¹⁴ As a model of being peace, Rogers showed us how to practice deep listening, deep thinking, and deep understanding—each of them antidotes to violence in any form.

He also showed us how to take tough action when others undermine our efforts to be peacemakers. In December 1998, for instance, he instructed his lawyer to file a lawsuit against a Texas novelty chain store that was selling T-shirts depicting him, clad in his red sweater, as sporting a handgun and saying, “Welcome to my hood.”¹⁵ He was so angry that he insisted that the store not only stop selling the shirts but also destroy them. Fred Rogers was no passive pacifist.

Modeling peacefulness was one of his preferred methods for creating peacemakers because he believed the old Quaker saying “Attitudes are caught not taught.”¹⁶ It’s perhaps this belief, coupled with his quiet style, that is the underlying reason for our failure to recognize Fred Rogers as one of the most radical pacifists of contemporary history. Because he did not grab headlines by pouring blood on files at the Pentagon, climbing atop the cones of nuclear weapons, leading rallies against the Persian Gulf War, or publicly lobbying against the War on Terror, Rogers has long remained deep in the shadows of the history of progressive dreamers—a history populated in the United States by the likes of William Garrison and Lucretia Mott, Jane Addams and Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King Jr. and Dorothy Day, Robert Kennedy and Marian Wright Edelman.

But as you will see in the pages ahead, although he is one of the most underappreciated peacemakers in U.S. history, Fred Rogers richly deserves a place in the pantheon of pacifists who tried to shake the foundations of society and culture. To the day of his death, he was a radical Christian pacifist—fervently committed to the end of violence and the presence of social justice in its full glory. The time has come for us to pull him out of the shadows so we can celebrate him just as he was—a fierce peacemaker.