

Mister Rogers on the Work of Childhood

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To ask about a child's vocation is to ask about the special task that God has placed before a very small person. To define that vocation is to dare to speak about a child's inner world, something that eludes the grasp of many a grown-up. Of course, every grown-up was once a child, but nevertheless, any grown-up wanting to address a topic like the vocation of the child should probably spend a good deal of time with children learning what they are about. Precisely for this reason, in my own effort to think about the matter I have turned for guidance to someone from my own childhood of whom I was very fond, a man who devoted his life to working with and understanding children: Mister Rogers.

Fred Rogers was a Presbyterian minister, who at his ordination received a special commission to serve children. The television show he created, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, was shaped clearly, although not explicitly, by his Christian commitments. Although to say that Mister Rogers offers us a "theology of the child" would be to go too far, he does offer a definite vision about the work of childhood. Children, I think Fred Rogers would say, are called to the work of growing. Growing involves learning to marvel about the world and to puzzle about one's place within it. In a broad sense growing is philosophical work, if by that one means a loving engagement with the world that grows out of a commitment to becoming the person one was meant to be. In what follows, I shall describe the child's work of growing as Fred Rogers understood it, showing, I hope, both the philosophical dimensions and Christian underpinnings of his vision.

1. You Are Special: The Reason for Growing

"You are special" is what Mister Rogers tells anyone who turns on his television program, almost every episode of which ends with the unqualified affirmation "People can like you exactly as you are." "I'm proud of you for growing," he adds on another occasion, and once or twice a week he makes a point of singing "It's you I like." Of course, the warm and fuzzy atmosphere on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* lent itself to parody and sometimes criticism. Rogers reports once receiving a critical letter from a parent that went something like this:

It's beneath your dignity to call someone 'special' just because he or she likes a particular shade of yellow, for instance. That's picayune; and if that's all uniqueness consists of, someone who has no virtues at all may still be able to say,

‘I’m unique!’ Is that what you want? When I look at my children, I can see all sorts of things that make them different from one another — and from everyone else in this world, for that matter. Big deal! I think you’d do better to concentrate on arousing children’s curiosity, creativity, and self-reliance, on building their capacity for realistic pride.¹

Even my six year old son, to be counted among Mister Rogers’ fans, once blurted out watching the show, “This is cheesy!”

Granted the show may seem “cheesy” at times to all but the most innocent of viewers, it is neither picayune nor facile. Rogers deliberately seeks to impart to children a sense of unconditional worth, because he believes a sense of self-worth is a necessary condition for learning and growing. The sense that what we do is worthwhile depends upon the sense that we ourselves are worthwhile. Thus, if children are to develop the dispositions they need to engage the world, they need first to know that they are valuable in themselves. As Rogers says, “I do believe good feelings about the world and what it offers take root through earlier good feelings about the first important people in our lives.”²

The words “you are special,” however, reflect more than developmental strategy. They express Fred Rogers’ sincere belief in the unique value of every human being. “There’s only one person in the whole world like you,” he says famously, “If you think about it for a moment, there never has been . . . and there never will be – in the history of the earth – another person just like you.”³ This metaphysical conviction is one that Rogers seeks to communicate to children in ways they can understand. When, for example, Mister Rogers sings, “It’s you I like, The way you are right now, The way down deep inside you, Not the things that hide you, Not your toys—they’re just beside you,” he is trying to help children experience the truth of unconditional love. When Mister Rogers stares straight into the camera and says, “People can like you just the way you are,” he wants children to come to know a simple but profound truth: everyone has a unique and purposeful existence within the fabric of the universe.

That this is true, however, is not always readily apparent. “You are special” may be a sweet thing to say to children, but the truth behind the words depends upon Mister Rogers’ unstated Christian conviction. Only if each individual has been called by God toward a certain history can we look with confidence for the special gift in every child. One Christian philosopher who sets forth an interpretation of love and its relationship to development in a way that resonates with Fred Rogers’ is Josef Pieper. According to

¹ Fred Rogers and Barry Head, Mister Rogers’ How Families Grow. New York: Berkley Books, 1988: 44.

² Ibid: 42.

³ Fred Rogers, You are Special: Words of Wisdom from America’s Most Beloved Neighbor. New York: Viking Penguin, 1994: 3.

Pieper, love resembles approval, so that to love someone is to say, “It’s good that you exist; how wonderful that you are!” This approval also corresponds to the truth of things, so that to love someone is not just to affirm but to discern another’s beauty. The beloved is lovable as a matter of fact; to tell the truth, it is good that you exist. The truth of the affirmation rests upon another truth, namely, that all which exists has been made by God; God intends the existence of each and every person. That obscure truth is grasped in the act of loving. The lover sees the beloved clearly, and, affirming his or her goodness, reprises God’s love. In Pieper’s words:

[The lover] “knows” that his affirmation directed toward the beloved would be pointless were not some other force akin to creation involved—and, moreover, a force not merely preceding his own love but one that is still at work and that he himself, the loving person, participates in and helps along by loving. . . . Human love, therefore, is by its nature and must inevitably be always an imitation and a kind of repetition of this perfected and, in the exact sense of the word, *creative* love of God.⁴

Love corresponds to the deepest truth about the universe, namely, that God is love and all that exists is lovable.

Cheesy though this truth may be, it translates on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* into a powerful confidence in the worth of every person, no matter how different. Consider, for example, a week’s sequence of episodes entitled “You and I Together.”⁵ On Monday, Mister Rogers brings to his studio home a toy van with a toy wheelchair. He plays with the toys, putting the wheelchair in and out of the van. Then he takes his “television neighbor” to visit a place where vans are outfitted with lifts for wheelchairs. Mister Rogers sits in a wheelchair and tries the lift, which carries him up into the van. Ben, a young boy in a wheelchair arrives, and we learn that the van has been outfitted for him. “Can I ask you something,” Mister Rogers says, “I think my television neighbors would be interested to know why you need to use a wheelchair.” Ben tells him, “When I was one-year-old I got disabled and I needed to use a wheelchair.” Later, in the Neighborhood of Make Believe, Mayor Maggie visits the neighborhood sitting in wheelchair. King Friday is upset; he worries that Mayor Maggie will catch a sickness from the chair. Dr. Bill Platypus assures everyone that a person can’t get sick from a wheelchair. After Make Believe is over, Mister Rogers discusses the issues: “We human beings are all different and we’re all the same in many ways.”

⁴ Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986: 171.

⁵ “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: You and I Together” Episodes 1726-1730. My summaries rely on notes taken during repeated viewings of video recorded episodes. Thus, I cannot vouchsafe the verbatim accuracy of every quotation, although I have striven for accuracy.

On Tuesday, Mister Rogers comes to the studio home with a stuffed gorilla. He sings to it "I'm Taking Care of You" and then tells his television neighbor that today they will visit a real gorilla named Ko Ko. We leave to visit Ko Ko and Mister Rogers sits in a pen while the enormous gorilla hugs and cuddles him. As Mister Rogers gets ready to leave, the gorilla uses sign language to say, "I love you." "Well I enjoy being with you," Mister Rogers says. Back in the studio home, Mister Rogers thinks about his visit with Ko Ko. "You know, she really had feelings," he says. Next, in the Neighborhood of Make Believe, there is a gorilla (or someone in a gorilla costume). Everyone is afraid. Lady Elaine sets off the gorilla alarm. The gorilla is sad and starts crying when everyone runs away from him. On Wednesday, Mister Rogers goes to the optometrist for an eye exam. In the Neighborhood of Make Believe Lady Aberlin and Prince Tuesday discover that the gorilla is friendly, but Lady Elaine sets off the gorilla alarm again and says she's going to catch the gorilla just like they do in the movies. After Make Believe, Mr. McFeely arrives with a video for Picture Picture about how people make eyeglasses. When the video is over Mister Rogers asks his television neighbor, "Do you know anyone who wears eyeglasses?" He notes that some people wear eyeglasses and other people don't.

On Thursday, Mister Rogers enters the studio home with four wooden sticks and a ring. He goes to the kitchen, sits at the table, and rolls the sticks through the rings, making different shapes. "It would be impossible to do this without the one that is different from the rest," he says. Mr. McFeely arrives with a video for Picture Picture about a boy in a wheelchair and his dog. In the video we see a boy feeding the dog and the dog helping the boy. After the video is over, Mr. McFeely tells Mister Rogers he has a surprise: the boy and his dog are in the neighborhood and we can meet him. Mister Rogers asks the boy to tell his television neighbor why he uses a wheelchair. "I have brittle bones" the boy explains. The dog helps him do things he can't do by himself. "Everybody needs some kind of help," Mister Rogers says.

On Friday, Mister Rogers arrives in the studio home and goes into the kitchen to draw rainbows. He uses magic markers adding more and more colors to the rainbow as he draws. "The rainbow is more beautiful the more colors it has," he says. Stepping over to the fish, he notes that "each fish is different from all the other fish, just like people are all different." In the Neighborhood of Make Believe the characters learn that the gorilla is friendly. In fact, the gorilla can talk when people are kind to him. Daniel Striped Tiger suspects that the gorilla might really be someone in a costume. Indeed, we learn the gorilla is Neighbor Aber. "I wanted to see how people would treat me if they didn't know it was me," Aber says. Daniel says, "You can love no matter what people look like." Neighbor Aber adds, "Everybody inside wants to be accepted and loved, no matter what they look like on the outside." After the Make Believe segment, Mister Rogers reads a book about a dog who discovers that he's one of a kind. Then, as he steps out the

door before leaving for the week, Mister Rogers tells his television neighbor, “When you look at someone, remember they’re one of a kind.”

Throughout these episodes Mister Rogers has introduced children to differences among people and shown how to be comfortable with those differences. He has also tried to help children see that every person is lovable, even when they look different or even a little frightening. The physically disabled children that Rogers meets throughout the week share things in common with the rest of us, alongside their differences. The gorilla in the Neighborhood of Make Believe looks scary before we get to know him, but on the inside he is just like everyone else. Indeed, one important lesson of the week is that a person is more than what appears on the outside. It’s what’s on the inside that really counts, that makes a person special, and sometimes we need to look through appearances to see the beautiful inside part of someone.

“You are special,” therefore, communicates a message not only about oneself, but about every individual. Indeed, in Mister Rogers’ view, the ability to love others is closely related to love of self. In order to appreciate others for their uniqueness we need to appreciate the ways in which we ourselves are special; or in Rogers’ words, “Only by understanding our own uniqueness can we fully appreciate how special our neighbor really is. Only by being aware of our own endowments can we begin to marvel at the variety that our Creator has provided in humankind.”⁶ Thus learning to feel good about ourselves is an important part of learning to feel good about others. As Mister Rogers tells his viewers on another occasion, “Find the part of you that feels good, because that lets you love your neighbor, and your neighbor is anyone you happen to be with.”⁷

If, however, being able to love others depends upon the knowledge that I am lovable, knowing that I am lovable depends upon the experience of being loved. Only the experience of being loved can create the good feelings a person needs both to love and to grow. Here again is a point where Rogers’ understanding of the relationship between love and growth parallels that of Josef Pieper. Pieper, like Rogers, believes that everyone is lovable because their existence has been willed by God. Nevertheless, Pieper quickly adds, that truth about existence can only be known through the concrete experience of being loved. Pieper writes:

It does not suffice us simply to exist; we can do that “anyhow”. What matters to us, beyond mere existence, is the explicit confirmation: It is *good* that you exist; how wonderful you are! In other words, what we need over and above sheer existence is: to be loved by another person. That is an astonishing fact when we consider it closely. Being created by God actually does not suffice, it would

⁶ You are Special: 9.

⁷ “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Mister Rogers Talks About Love” Episode 1665

seem; the fact of creation needs continuation and perfection by the creative power of human love.⁸

Although each person is in fact lovable, possessing an inner beauty, that beauty can be known only if someone else confirms that it is so. The experience of being loved, Pieper says, is essential to growth. As Fred Rogers would put it, "a person can grow to his or her fullest capacity only in mutually caring relationships with other human beings."⁹ We all need a sense that "we belong in other people's lives – that we are loved, lovable, and capable of loving."¹⁰

2. The Work of Growing

Children need to know that they are special in order to grow, and helping children grow is the primary focus of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. As Rogers explains:

It's the "work" (the growth tasks) that children are doing beginning with the age of two that we've concentrated on most in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. This work consists largely in children's figuring out who and what they are, in identifying and expressing their feelings, and in developing their own unique understandings of their places in their world.¹¹

Growing, in Rogers' view, is the special task of childhood, and an important part of growing is self-discovery. To grow is to discover the ways in which we are special and to become the person who, in a sense, we already are.

The nature of growth as self-discovery is another lesson communicated through Mister Rogers' interaction with physically disabled persons. In one of his books Rogers talks about his experience with Tim Scanlon, a deaf actor who appeared on the show. Tim played a teacher in the Neighborhood of Make Believe. King Friday thinks that Tim can't teach because he speaks differently; but of course Friday and everyone else in Make Believe come to discover Tim's special gifts. Reflecting about Tim Scanlon, Rogers writes:

It's tempting to marvel at how Tim "overcame his handicap"—a phrase we often hear—but there's something about that phrase that doesn't ring true to my understanding. Not being able to hear was part of who Tim was and may remain so all through his life. Rather than "overcoming" who he was, Tim, as he grew, "became" who he is, drawing on both his talents and his limitations and

⁸ Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*: 174.

⁹ Fred Rogers and Barry Head, *Mister Rogers Talks with Parents*. Barnes & Nobles, Inc., 1983/1994: 21.

¹⁰ *You are Special*: 21.

¹¹ *Mister Rogers Talks with Parents*: 48

incorporating them into a whole and strong personality capable of giving great gifts to others.¹²

Tim grew by becoming who he was inside, not by trying to change or overcome his nature, and indeed, learning to accept our limitations as well as discovering our talents is an important part of growing.

Much the same lesson comes out on another occasion, when Mister Rogers visits the violinist Itzhak Perlman.¹³ At the beginning of the show, Mister Rogers tells his television neighbor that he has a friend who plays the violin whom he would like his television neighbor to meet. When we arrive at symphony hall, the practice room is empty. Then Perlman enters through a door and walks across the room to his violin with his crutches. Mister Rogers asks why Perlman uses crutches. Perlman explains that when he was four years old he got polio. They talk about how playing music can be a way to express feelings. On his violin Perlman plays a sad song and a happy song. "What a strong man you are," Mister Rogers says. The unstated message is that Perlman has learned to play the violin beautifully even with his limitations.

In fact, all the physically handicapped visitors to *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* speak comfortably about their limits, poignantly modeling self-acceptance. Self-acceptance is important because growth is a process of self-discovery. Unless we can learn to accept our limitations we will be unable to realize the potentials we do have. The capacity for self-acceptance, in turn, depends on the awareness that we are loved, lovable, and capable of loving. Indeed, the unflinching confidence with which Mister Rogers approaches persons suffering from obvious limitations like physical handicaps rests on his firm conviction that everyone is special, that every life has a purpose.

On the T.V. program Rogers does not give this conviction explicit theological footing, but his optimistic realism about human limits probably depends upon his Christian view of the world. Some of the things Rogers says about the relationship between self-acceptance, limits, and growth even echo things said by Karl Barth when the latter talked about vocation. According to Barth, vocation is the "totality of particularity" within which an individual encounters the command of God. Human existence is comprised of particularities that define the possibilities for a life path, or the outer shape of one's vocation. Within the frame of that vocation each individual encounters the command of God, which is a personal summons to choose what God has already chosen for him. Thus the limits circumscribing a particular life are in fact expressions of God's will. Within those limits God issues an individual summons. To answer that summons is to live out one's life in the freedom of limitation. Barth writes:

¹² Ibid: 79.

¹³ "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Mister Rogers Talks About Then and Now" Episode 1670.

Every man has, in the comprehensive sense of the term, his "virtue" or strength (virtus). He cannot do many things which others do. But he can do something, perhaps quite a few things, which no one else can do, or do as he can. This is the personal aptitude in respect of which he is useful as none other. This, too, is part of his vocation, nor can it be without significance for his divine calling and his relation to it, his obedience to the command of God. Within its limit, but also in its fullness, he stands before God and has to listen and answer and obey. He did not choose it. He was not asked whether he is pleased with it. He has received it from God, his Creator and Lord, as he enters upon decision and act. It is thus, in his personal aptitude, that God has willed and created him, that He has caused him to be.¹⁴

Individuals have different endowments, and these establish different possibilities and limits for a life's path. At the same time, God calls each individual to live in the fullness of his limits, which is to say, every life regardless, indeed because of its limits, has purpose.

Faith in the purposefulness of every human life stamps Fred Rogers' approach to limits. Each person, in Rogers view, is irreplaceably valuable; each person has something unique to give the world. The activities on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* aim at helping children discover who they are, as persons with both possibilities and limits, and then encouraging children to grow into themselves.

3. The Importance of Play

One of the most important things children can do to grow is to play, which Fred Rogers' describes as children's work. He writes:

[I]n childhood, work and play seem to come together. However we may think of the two worlds now that we're grown up, it's fair to say that for young children, their play *is* their work, and the more we can encourage children to play, the more we will be giving them a really important lifelong resource to draw on.¹⁵

The character of play as work stems from its relationship to learning. Play, Rogers says, is "the process of finding new combinations for known things—combinations that may yield new forms of expression, new inventions, new discoveries, and new solutions."¹⁶ Thus play is both an expression of creativity and a form of problem-solving. Young children need to learn many things on their own, e.g., how to sit up, how to crawl, how to

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961: 624.

¹⁵ *Mister Rogers Talks with Parents*: 95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

walk and how to talk, and the only way children can learn these sorts of things is by trying out, or playing with, different possibilities. Rogers explains:

Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning. We all need to practice new things before we can feel comfortable with them. Children who are about a year old may spend a lot of time practicing about the inside and outside of things. It may surprise us to see how long a baby of this age can spend putting a block in a box. . .and taking it out again. . .and putting it back in. . .and taking it out again. Or a toddler may, over and over again, climb into a little cart and then climb out. . .in and out. It may seem odd play to us, but how else except through this kind of play is a child to understand the difference between the inside and outside of things?¹⁷

When children get a little older they engage in pretend play, which is way for them to try out feelings and figure out solutions to problems they encounter growing up. Pretend play is a way for children to work on understanding the world and their place within it. It is philosophical work.

On *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* pretending plays an important role through the daily visits to the Neighborhood of Make Believe. The puppet characters in Make Believe have distinct personalities that Rogers uses to focus on different feelings children experience. Pretending thus becomes a vehicle for working through difficult or puzzling issues. Consider, for example, the way Rogers uses the Neighborhood of Make Believe to help children think about, and puzzle over, the nature of work.

On the first day of the week Mister Rogers arrives at the studio home with a letter.¹⁸ He shows his television neighbor the envelope and points out the stamp: “You see it costs money to send a letter in the mail, because the people who work for the post office have to get paid somehow, and the money we use for stamps helps do that.” The letter is from the postmaster general, who has agreed to let Mister Rogers and his television neighbor come to see how people make stamps. We visit the postmaster general. “I’d like to know how a person gets to be postmaster general,” Mister Rogers says, “Were you always interested in the postal service?” “Yes,” says the postmaster general, “I’ve worked for over forty years in the postal service, and I started as an assistant messenger.” Next, we visit Mr. Holbrooke, a man who draws designs for stamps. Mister Rogers marvels at the work Mr. Holbrooke is doing and asks, “When you were a little boy, did you always like stamps even back then?” “I didn’t pay a lot of attention to stamps, but I always loved to draw,” Mr. Holbrooke says. He needed to go to college and take a seven year

¹⁷ Mister Rogers Talks with Parents: 97-8.

¹⁸ “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood: Mister Rogers Talks About Work” Episodes 1526-1530

apprenticeship to get the job he has now. “That’s a lot of years of work,” Mister Rogers says. “It’s very rewarding and I enjoy it,” says Mr. Holbrooke.

Returning to the studio home, the trolley takes us to the Neighborhood of Make Believe. The weather is hot and each character is working on finding a way to cope with the heat. Handyman Negri is delivering the annual tax report. It is filled with pictures which show how the tax money was spent to keep the Neighborhood in good shape. Taxes help to pay for things like trimming X’s tree and fixing the streets if they get holes in them, Negri explains. After reviewing the annual report, King Friday notes that there is a surplus of 3000. He decides to use that money to buy a swimming pool for the Neighborhood, so that everyone can cool off. The characters are excited. After Make Believe, Mister Rogers asks, “Did you understand all that talk about taxes? Well in the towns and cities where people live, people put their money together so they can have things like roads, and schools, and things that everybody needs. The money they use for that is called taxes.”

On Tuesday, Mister Rogers takes his television neighbor to a dairy farm to see where milk comes from. We see how the cows are milked and how the milk is placed in containers and shipped out to grocery stores. “This whole thing must cost a lot of money,” Mister Rogers says to the owner of the dairy farm. “Yes, when you own a business it’s very expensive,” the dairy farmer says, “but it’s rewarding too.” Back in the Neighborhood of Make Believe, Anna Platypus is waiting for her father to come home from work so they can go on a picnic together, but he’s so late getting home that the picnic has to be cancelled. “You’re father is a doctor and people need him,” Anna’s mother explains. “Everybody’s always working,” Anna says, “I guess I have to work on my disappointment.” “When your father is helping other people instead of helping you, that can feel pretty unfair,” Lady Aberlin says, but “Your father cares for you very much. That’s why he works so hard, because he cares for you.” Meanwhile, the surveyors are surveying to determine the cost of the pool. It will cost 4000, but the Neighborhood only has 3000. The characters decide to save money by digging the hole themselves. That way the pool will only cost 3000. After Make Believe, Mister Rogers goes to the kitchen and shows his television neighbor how to make building blocks from cardboard milk cartons. He explains that sometimes toys cost too much and parents can’t buy them. But children can still make their own toys using things like milk cartons.

On Wednesday in Make Believe, everyone is pitching in to help dig the hole for the swimming pool. Daniel Stripped Tiger admits to Lady Aberlin that he’s not excited about digging. “That’s OK,” Lady Aberlin says, “work doesn’t always have to be fun and exciting; sometimes it can be hard and tiresome, and that’s that.” Daniel and Aberlin climb down into the hole to help with the digging. Daniel notes how different things are. “Indeed,” says King Friday, “I never dreamed our work would change things so.” “For

the better,” chimes in Lady Aberlin. “Yes, all work should change things for the better,” says King Friday. Suddenly water begins sprouting out from the ground. King Friday calls for professional assistance. The water people arrive and discover that the pipes have broken and will need to be repaired. After Make Believe, Mister Rogers talks about work: “I’ve been thinking about how work changes things. Children can change things too by doing a good job. Like changing the way a room looks by picking up your toys when you’re done with your play, or changing the way your plate of food looks by eating your food. Good work can make good changes, and can give a good feeling.”

On Thursday in Make Believe the characters learn that repairing the pipes will cost 3000. But the Neighborhood doesn’t have 3000 and everyone tries to think of a solution. Daniel suggests that they use the money they were going to spend on the swimming pool to fix the pipes. “But we wouldn’t have a swimming pool,” Anna Platypus says. “What good is a swimming pool if there’s no water in it,” says Daniel. After Make Believe, Mister Rogers comments, “Nobody can have everything. . . .That’s why it’s important to learn to make good choices and choose what’s really important. . . .It’s important to learn to play too,” he adds.

On Friday Mister Rogers brings his puppets with him and talks about his work, which is making television programs. He shows us the set for his television home, the lights, the T.V. cameras, and all the people working in the studio. “It takes a lot of people to make a television program,” he says, “And all those people care about you. They want to make the best kind of programs they can for families like yours.” Then Mister Rogers talks about the work that children do. We watch a video of children “working,” i.e., playing the piano, painting, setting the table, helping to bring groceries in from the car, playing with blocks, picking up toys and putting them away. “Some of the things that children do for their work look like play,” Mister Rogers says; “Well playing and understanding things is a big part of children’s work.” Next, it’s time for Make Believe. King Friday has a check for 3000 that he writes to pay the pipe people for fixing the pipes. Daniel is disappointed about not having a pool. “What do you do when you’re disappointed,” Handyman Negri asks him. “I work on it,” Daniel says. Mayor Maggie and Neighbor Aber arrive from Westwood. We learn that in Westwood they have enough money for a pool, but not enough water. Now that the Neighborhood has new pipes, the two places can work together to build a pool between Westwood and the Neighborhood that everyone can use.

This week of episodes has helped to explain grown-up work to children. Grown-ups work to earn money, which is needed to buy things. They also work because they care about children. The story line in Make Believe focuses on the kinds of feelings children might have as they first learn about work. Work can be fun and rewarding, but it also establishes limits that can be a source of disappointment. Anna Platypus must learn to

handle her disappointment when her father comes home late from work, and all the puppets must work on their disappointment about not getting a swimming pool. The pretending in *Make Believe* helps children sort out the nature work without offering straightforward or simple answers. Is work fun or toilsome? Is it something we do for money or because it gives our lives purpose? The characters in *Make Believe* must puzzle over these questions - and in fact so must we all. Pretending is one important way that children begin to engage the world philosophically.

Perhaps nowhere is the philosophical character of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* clearer than when the program tackles mature and difficult topics, such as, for instance, death. Consider the following episode devoted to the theme "Then and Now."¹⁹ Early in the show Mr. McFeely stops by with a dead bird in his hands. He says he found the bird during deliveries and asks Mister Rogers for a box to place the bird in so he can bury it. Mr. McFeely and Mister Rogers reflect on the fact that there will never be another bird exactly like this one again. Mr. McFeely departs, and Mister Rogers tells his television neighbor about the time his cat Sybil died and how sad that made him feel. Mister Rogers even has a picture of Sybil that he shows to his viewers. Next, in *Make Believe*, King Friday is playing with his two birds, Trogladites Aedon and Mimus Polyglotus. Friday tells Handyman Negri that he doesn't want his birds to die, because that happened once with a bird Friday had and he didn't like it. Negri explains to Friday that Trogladites Aedon and Mimus Polyglotus can't die, because they are wooden birds on sticks. They're toys and toys can't die. Negri adds that King Friday's memories of his real bird will always be with him. Next Lady Aberlin stops by at Henrietta Pussycat and X the Owl's place. Henrietta is thinking about what it would be like to die. Lady Aberlin explains that when people die it's not like going to sleep. X the Owl is not sure about death, he just knows that he's going to live every day as it comes. Lady Aberlin moves on to visit Daniel Striped Tiger. Daniel is playing with his toy truck. He tells Aberlin he doesn't want his truck to die. "Your truck can't die," Aberlin says, "it's a toy; toys don't get born and grow, and they don't die." "It's good to be born and to live," Daniel says, and then pausing, adds, "and to die." "And to be real," says Lady Aberlin. After *Make Believe* is over Mister Rogers talks a little bit about the issues. "Daniel thought it's good to live and to die and to be real," he says, "It's part of life." Then he reads a book titled When a Pet Dies. After he finishes, Mister Rogers tells his television neighbor, "Everything that lives will someday die. But I believe it's worth it be a real person. And this life wants us to be all we can be."

This is pretty heavy stuff for children's television, but Rogers' willingness to take on the topic reflects, I think, his recognition that death is a mystery with which even young children must grapple. In some respects, he treats the topic delicately. He does not

¹⁹ "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Mister Rogers Talks About Then and Now" Episode 1669

explicitly discuss human death, for example, and he never says to the children watching, "someday you will die." But in other respects his treatment is frankly honest. Mister Rogers makes no effort to hide from children their mortality or that of those they love, and although he does try to put death in perspective, he never offers answers he does not have. Death is a mystery children need to work out partly on their own – and so must we all. Working things out on one's own, after all, is part of growing.

Helping children to puzzle is not the only philosophical aspect of the television program. Often on the show Mister Rogers encourages children to wonder. "Did you know? Did you know? Did you know that it's alright to wonder?" he sings frequently; "You can ask a lot of questions about the world, and your place in it. . . .Did you know that when you wonder, you're learning?" In fact, the slow, deliberate pace of the show allows children the opportunity to ponder. For example, on one episode Mister Rogers arrives at the studio home with a potted plant.²⁰ "I want you to see something," he says; "Did you ever take a lot of time to look at a flower?" The camera focuses on the buds and leaves. After a long pause Mister Rogers asks, "What do you think when you look at them?" The camera moves out as Mister Rogers talks about the flower. "Do you like to look at something like this plant really carefully? If you do, that's one way to know you're growing." Then he sings, "It's good to look carefully. Listen carefully. That's the way you learn a lot of things carefully." On another occasion he takes his television neighbors to an aquarium.²¹ Throughout the visit, the camera zooms in on swimming fish literally for minutes at a time. The purpose of such activities is to awaken in children an interest and love for the world.

Children, in short, are little philosophers who must learn to look and listen, puzzle and marvel about the world. Children as they learn are simultaneously discovering things about themselves and their relation to the world. Learning thus depends upon a love of self which opens up to a love of the world. "A love of learning," Rogers says, "has a lot to do with learning that we're loved."²²

As I conclude these reflections the reader should not forget that *Mister Rogers Neighborhood* is intended for pre-school aged children. No doubt some aspects of Fred Rogers' approach would not succeed with older children. Loving encouragement, although absolutely essential, cannot forever protect us from the world's harsher, less than marvelous realities. As children get older I suspect also that they have need for a kind of "tough love" that sits uneasily with the perpetual affirmation on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. But then again, the show is for small children, and about small children

²⁰ "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Transformations: No matter how we change on the outside, we're still ourselves on the inside" Episode 1697.

²¹ "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Mister Rogers Talks About Grandparents" Episode 1534.

²² How Families Grow: 42.

Fred Rogers has much to teach. Most importantly, he teaches us that even the very young are seriously at work understanding the world and their place within it. Their work, carried out largely through play, depends upon loving support from adults. Nevertheless, it is work they carry out alone, and in a sense it is philosophical work. The questions children ask about themselves and their world are the kinds of questions to which we return throughout our lives, even when vocation and responsibilities take us elsewhere. How fitting, therefore, if at the beginning of life each of us is a little philosopher.