

Transitions and Change: A Tribute to Mr. Fred Rogers

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As part of the United Methodist pastor's "itinerant system" which in translation really means "we move a lot", my family became accustomed to meeting new neighbors. Sometimes the adjustment to new surroundings seemed awkward and lonely to our three daughters, who missed their old playmates, and also to their mother who missed close friends. But one neighbor that consistently moved with us was Mr. Fred Rogers. On the Mr. Rogers Show, when Fred sang "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood" this man's mixture of familiarity, gentleness, and love was a way that God helped us to ease transitional stress. Fred's initiative in asking through the television screen "won't you be my neighbor?" was a part of God's plan to symbolically pave the way for us to trust reaching out to new neighbors and congregations. It also helped us to trust the hand that was first extended to us.

Upon the recent death of Fred Rogers, a grieving process and life-cycle change process occurred within my home that caught me by surprise. In a realistic sense, this mother of two grown daughters and a teenage daughter, has a number of years between the last family move and the last Mr. Rogers Show. Also from a realistic sense, it has been about eleven years since our teenage daughter, Rebecca, has watched the last Mr. Rogers Show with a blanket and a bowl of cereal. But this passage of time seemed to enhance rather than detract from, the need to grieve.

The day after Fred died, Rebecca came home for lunch. Her temporary driver's permit, which she and her father picked up an hour before, sat much like a "new neighbor" in the front hall. She had barely met him. He had been introduced, but Rebecca's experience with how that new neighbor would react with her and she with him, was yet unknown. When she got behind the wheel of a car for the first time, there would be tentative maneuvers, unexpected responses, and (hopefully) a heightened sense of watchfulness and awareness.

So before her first father/daughter driving session, Rebecca and her mother settled in to watch The Mr. Rogers Show. There were no tentative maneuvers or unexpected responses from Mr. Rogers. He said "hi neighbor" just as he always did, and we said "hi" back. We didn't need to be especially watchful or aware during the program, because he had the same cardigan, the same pair of shoes, and he turned around the same way to greet the trolley. He told us the lesson today was on "smiles" and would we smile into the camera at him? We did. He pulled various noisemakers out of a bag, demonstrated them, and then asked if we could make the "noise" of quiet. We sat respectfully still. When it was time for the show to be over, Mr. Rogers walked toward the door and said "see you again!" I let the tears come.

In the cycle of grief and loss, there is often a complimentary cycle of life transition. It is an ending of one phase of life, and the beginning of another. To successfully negotiate these transitions, it is important to not move too quickly into the new phase, without adequately processing, or sometimes grieving, the old phase. It is wise to leave some margin or space between the two phases, to allow the Lord to move in whatever way He chooses to bridge the gap. Allow some of the familiar sounds, smells, or sights of the old phase to take residence a little longer. It is also common to vacillate between the two phases for awhile, until the new phase becomes, shall we say, "neighborly." May the gracious Lord bless each and every one of you, in whatever transition may be at your doorstep. May He pass through any new gates with you, preparing the way, building up the new highways, and removing the stones (Isaiah 62:10). May He grant you the courage to love your new neighbor, in whatever form that may be, as you love yourself (Luke 10:27).

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