Mister Rogers: Subversive Televangelist[1]

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Neil Postman didn't think much of television.[2] You might even say he despised it. In his now classic *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman argued that our ways of imagining ourselves and our world were all impoverished by the rise of TV in the second half of the twentieth century. It wasn't the content per se that Postman found objectionable. Rather, it was the form itself he resisted. Or, more precisely, the medium of TV and its content are inseparable—"the medium *is* the message," as Marshall McLuhan would say.[3]

TV privileges the spectacle, the emotional, and the superficial. That is, it's best suited to rapidly deliver a flood of eye-catching and increasingly fleeting images. Of course, entertainment serves a real function in the life of a flourishing community, but the problem arises when TV is tasked with weightier things—mediating our politics, delivering our news, teaching our children, and connecting us to God. Channeling such important conversations through the cathode ray, Postman explained, erodes society's foundations.

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[2] Neil Postman's most stringent critiques of television are laid out in *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985).

[3] See Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964).

Three decades before Postman, Fred Rogers[4] also took issue with television. Coming of age at the dawn of the TV era, he found the bulk of the shows on offer appalling. As Fred recounts, "I went home my senior year for a vacation in Latrobe, and I saw this new thing called television.... And I saw people dressed up in some kind of costumes, literally throwing pies in each other's faces."[5] He was "sickened by the crass, low-grade humor" of these shows.[6] Yet Fred opted to work in television for the better part of five decades. For someone who thought so little of TV, it's frankly astonishing that Fred came to be known primarily for his work in that field. On closer examination, however, the seeming contradiction is beautifully resolved. In fact, in that resolution, we find a wealth of wisdom and hope, much richer and deeper than what's offered by Postman. Fred's courage, conviction, and commitment combined to redeem the airwaves into a spiritual conduit—aimed at humanizing and life-giving ends. A kind of subversive televangelism if you will. Today, although our media landscape has changed, the temptations of Postman remain strong—to blame technology for society's ills and to withdraw our participation in it. To wring our hands rather than roll up our sleeves. It's understandable to feel overwhelmed. It's ugly out there. But a closer look at Fred's countercultural use of TV for the good of his neighbor can instill in us hope. His ministry, we find, is exactly the kind of inspiration and guidance we need to do the same in our spheres of influence today.

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[4] Although I use Postman's last name when referring to him and his work, it feels odd to do the same for Fred Rogers. I think the reason that's so lies at the heart of my argument: Mister Rogers insists on personal connection, even—and perhaps especially—across a technological divide.

[5] Maxwell King, *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers* (New York: Abrams Press, 2018), 67.

[6] Ibid.

To start, Fred's critique of television differed from Postman's. Postman was concerned primarily with the make-up of television as a technology, the way that the form itself shapes public discourse and constrains the communication that's possible on its terms. He was pessimistic about TV's prospects. For Postman, television could be only detrimental. Fred, on the other hand, was concerned with the uses of television, the ends to which it was directed. He thought that those producing it had a weighty moral responsibility, given how far-reaching their decisions were. Fred bemoaned the focus on ratings and pandering to the audience, appealing to their basest instincts. It offended his sensibilities, especially, to treat children this way. There's a quote from him to this effect in Morgan Neville's 2018 documentary: "There's so many people who will just lump 'em all together and say, 'Hey, kids, come along. We'll see the next cartoon.' And they couldn't care less about what that cartoon is saying to the child about such things as human dignity."[7] Human dignity, of course, is precisely what Fred cared about. For that reason, he saw the often-dehumanizing environment of television as a mission field of sorts and sought out the unusual ordination from the Pittsburgh Presbytery as a minister to television. The screen would be his pulpit, the viewers his parishioners.

Unlike Postman, Fred saw beyond television's deficiencies to its possibilities. It need not be directed merely at titillation or entertainment. Instead, it could be a force for good. That revelation redirected Fred's whole career path, shifting him from going to seminary right out of college to finding a position in television in order to learn the business. With remarkable prescience, Fred saw that television might just be the perfect venue to weave together his

[7] *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* Directed by Morgan Neville (Focus Features, 2018).

interests in music, childhood education, and ministry, precisely because it was a visual medium that could meet children where they were.[8]

Most of all, in light of the typical televised fare, Fred discerned a real need in that cultural space, one that he believed he could meet. If only television were used well, it could benefit its viewers and the broader community. His friend Jeannine Morrison says that's exactly what he planned to do, to start thinking seriously about worthwhile programming for children.[9] Such a lofty goal might suggest that, contra Postman, Fred saw the form of television and its content as separable. In reality, it was the medium itself that drew him to TV. He clearly saw in the camera possibilities that Postman did not. And he realized how wonderful it would be to reach children across the social spectrum. The televised form, in other words, would be for Fred the very means by which he encouraged children's flourishing.

Remarkably, Postman doesn't engage with *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, even though the show had become a PBS staple by the time his analysis of the corrosive effects of TV was published in 1985. One can only wonder how the program would fit into Postman's diatribe. I suspect he would dismiss *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* as an outlier, insignificant in the grand scheme of things. The truth, however, is that Fred complicates Postman's doom and gloom predictions, both affirming his critiques of TV and blazing a corrective trail forward. In fact, in Fred's embrace of the very venue most apt to cause problems for children in his day, he was able to reverse its degrading tendencies and empower children to do the same. In episode after episode, Fred peeled back the façade of television and invited his audience—his neighbors—to peer beneath and examine its operations together, not as a cynical

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[8] King, 67.

[9] Ibid.

exercise but as a demystifying one. Doing so would disempower the TV image and arguably divest it of any unjust grip it might have on viewers. In turn, this analysis would reinvest children with the power and the skills to understand and explore their worlds.

Television is no respecter of persons: all content is available to all comers. The programs are readily accessible at the click of a channel. Additionally, it has no literacy prerequisites such as those required for a person to make sense of the printed word. That's not to say, of course, that children are emotionally or intellectually prepared for what they will encounter on the screen. Often far from it. Fred agreed with Postman on this score. Thus the heightened responsibility Fred thought that television producers had—he outlines this in his 1992 speech at Yale:

> The impact of television must be considered in the light of the possibility that children are exposed to experiences which may be far beyond what their egos can deal with effectively. Those of us who produce television must assume the responsibility for providing images of trustworthy available adults who will modulate these experiences and attempt to keep them within manageable limits.[10]

We see this moral seriousness everywhere in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Take, for example, the theme week on superheroes in 1980. After hearing of a child who hurt himself jumping off a roof with a towel, a la Superman, Fred committed to helping his audience distinguish fact from fiction, appearance from reality on these shows.[11] He took children behind the television curtain, showing them the inner workings of *The Incredible Hulk* for example and introducing them to the actors who played the characters. Simultaneously, he used the *Neighborhood*'s own world of make-believe to highlight the dangers of confusing TV fantasy with flesh and blood reality. Prince Tuesday is tempted with delusions of grandeur when he's able to trick Lady Aberlin, and

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[10] Ibid., 242.

[11] Ibid., 243.

Ana Platypus nearly crashes when she thinks her skirt can make her fly.[12] With such examples, Fred trained his viewers to use their imaginations rightly.

This is just one way that *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* falsified Postman's insistence that television was necessarily corrosive to culture. Each and every element of Fred's show was carefully crafted toward uplifting ends. Unlike *Sesame Street*, which Postman called "an expensive illustration of the idea that education is indistinguishable from entertainment,"[13] *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* opted for "intentional and pervasive slow pacing," "deliberate speech patterns," "restricted camera movements," and long segments and shots.[14] It's not that *Mister Rogers* is boring, not at all. Rather, it has a weight and seriousness that *Sesame Street*, whatever its other virtues, does not. Fred consciously resisted what Zelevansky called the "quick cut, short attention span presentation" of *Sesame Street*, which was built on hyperstimulation and noise.[15] The camera and images of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* still mattered, but they were turned on their head. Fred kept his audience enraptured—not by frenetic energy and a constant barrage of images—but through highlighting the pleasures of stillness, of focus, of contemplation. In this way and so many others, he made goodness attractive and trained the eyes of his viewers to recognize and desire that goodness.

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[12] Ibid., 244.

[13] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 94.

[14] Philip J. Hutchinson, "Mister Rogers' Holy Ground: Exploring the Media Phenomenology of the Neighborhood and Its Rituals," *Journal of Media and Religion* 20 (2021), 72.

[15] Paul Zelevansky, "'The Good Thing': *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*," *American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 64 (204), 202.

Children, Fred understood, were being catechized by TV, and he thought it crucial to push back against the negative influences from within the field itself, to confront the problem at its source. In a PSA Fred recorded after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he called viewers to the work of *tikkun olam*, a concept from Judaism that means "repairers of creation."[16] Through his life's work, Fred embodied this practice. He saw with crystal clarity a problem in need of fixing for which he was uniquely prepared to help. His was an incarnational ministry, bringing goodness and hope to what tended to be a hostile field that degraded its audience and thereby transforming it.

Central to his success in this connection was his conviction that human flourishing involves both head and heart. Emotions are to be honored and celebrated. They are essential to who we are as human beings and, for children especially, they should be "mentionable and manageable."[17] This is another point at which Fred disagrees with Postman. Postman's critique of TV relies on a strict dichotomy between reason and emotion, abstraction and concreteness, logic and passion, print culture and image culture. TV was squarely on the passion side of the line he drew between these pairs, and we were poorer off for its influence he thought.

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[16] The video itself is hard to locate, but Sarah Kettler discusses it in her August 2020 *Biography* article entitled "How Mister Rogers Helped Heal the Nation after September 11": https://www.biography.com/actors/mister-rogers-september-11-2001.

[17] This goal of empowering children to better understand and manage their emotions drove so much of Fred Rogers' work with children. He articulates it clearly in his memorable 1969 testimony to the Senate subcommittee on Communications, found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=fKy7ljRr0AA&t=30s.

Fred instead knew that children, and all of us, are more than mere logic choppers. We're not just cognitive creatures, but richly relational, conative, and affective. Holistic training involves our hearts as well. Fred never eschewed the rational but sought through his work to marry it to the emotional—to form children body, mind, and soul. As C. S. Lewis wrote a decade and a half before *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* premiered, "The task of the modern educator is not to cut down jungles but to irrigate deserts,"[18] not to rid the pupil of sentiments but to inculcate the right ones. Television, Fred was convinced, could do just that.

The quintessential example from *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* of this educative process is when Daniel Striped Tiger confessed to Lady Aberlin that he often felt like he was a mistake.[19] Tigers aren't supposed to be tame, after all. Lady Aberlin provided a safe space for that vulnerable and courageous revelation without offering easy answers. The precious duet the two then sing helps children know they are not the only ones with such fears and that there are other voices that can support us when we doubt ourself. Daniel's doubts are not erased but are tempered by Lady Aberlin's reassuring lyrics:

> I think you are just fine as you are
> I really must tell you
> I do like the person that you are becoming
> When you are sleeping
> When you are waking
> You are my friend

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[18] C. S. Lewis, *Abolition of Man*, first published 1943 (New York: Harper One, 2015), 14.

[19] *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, season 15, episode 78, "Mistakes," directed by Paul Lally, aired May 5, 1987, on *PBS*, https://www.pbs.org/video/mister-rogers-neighborhood-mistakes-daniel-wonders-if-hes-a-mistake/.

She reminds him that it's okay, good even, that he is not like everyone else. He matters to her, and his differences actually make him special. It's a beautiful display of the expression of care that Fred aimed for in every episode, to help children realize they are unique. Understanding is not a matter of reason alone but needs to sink deep in order to really stick. Daniel's feelings, just as those of the viewers, are not logical mistakes to be corrected but tender spots that need nurturing.

This scene also underscores that *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* aimed at far more than education. Fred saw his program as a ministry. He was ordained for such purposes after all. Fred was adamant that spiritual care could be mediated by way of television. Here we see the starkest divide between Postman and Fred. For Postman, TV stripped away everything that made attempts to address the spiritual needs of viewers profound and sacred: "[T]here is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence."[20] The TV-watching space, even for religious programming, is the same in which everyday life occurs. It has not been "divested of its profane uses" or "invested with some measure of sacrality."[21]

This seems a formidable argument, until one considers the phenomenon of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. How can one not recognize the profundity and reverence that pervades every episode of the show? A careful viewer can see that *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* is motivated by rich theology, defined by ritual, and redolent with tradition. Fred brings doctrine to life, and in a manner best delivered by TV. Drawing on the strengths of the audiovisual form, he shows rather than tells. Episode after episode, Fred puts the lie to Postman's overly deterministic critique of TV's strictures. Fred was a humanist through and through, and while he was

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[20] Postman, 117.

[21] Ibid., 119.

discerning enough to understand the problematic biases of the television medium, he always sought out redemptive possibilities by drawing on its strengths.

With determination and deep faith, Fred was able to create a hallowed space—a neighborhood that extended into viewers' homes and welcomed them into a loving relationship. Postman's protestations aside, the experience was thus sanctified, as Fred saw it: "The space between the television screen and whoever happens to be receiving it, I consider that to be very holy ground. A lot happens there."[22] Through the liturgy of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, he encourages children to tap into that spiritual realm themselves, or rather to recognize that they were already there. In the words of Fred's beloved *Little Prince*, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eyes."[23]

Fred could not physically reach into the space of the viewers, but he prepared the field for his neighbors nonetheless. Hutchinson argues that Fred intentionally blended media theory with his applied theology to create a "site for intimacy, reflection, and growth."[24] Where Postman would suggest such technological intimacy was impossible, watching Fred in action—both in the neighborhood and beyond—quickly dispels this notion. Adults who viewed the program as children flock to him, he brought (and brings) audiences to tears, and his quotes pluck our heartstrings at their deepest chord.

The neighborhood motif that grounded Fred's program was not a mere gimmick. It was at the heart of the whole endeavor, and Fred used the camera to highlight its centrality. From the

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[22] Hutchinson 66.

[23] *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was a favorite of Fred Rogers, and its philosophy pervades much of his work and life.

[24] Hutchinson, 67.

opening outside shot panning through the streets to Mister Rogers' entrance into the living room, the whole atmosphere of the show is one of hospitality. Townley points to Fred's use of transitions as key to the service he provided children. In this way, Fred helped children sustain their concentration during the program and exercise it after the show concludes.[25] They're also woven into the liturgy Fred practiced with his audience. He changed his shoes to mark the move from the world outside to the intimacy of the home. He donned his sweater to signal his role as a loving, trusted authority figure. And the camera followed the trolley to transition between real life and make-believe.[26] Building on these constants, throughout the episodes, Fred would introduce children to outside visitors, both regulars and guests, in a move that expanded their world little by little. Whatever the specific topic of the day or week, the format of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* remained the same. Viewers may venture outside or into make-believe, but they always start and end with a song in the foyer.[27] In the midst of television's mania for excitement, for hurry, for glitz and glamour, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* offered stability, constancy, and reliability.

With unwavering commitment spanning decades, Fred insisted on his vision, not for his own sake but always for the sake of his audience. For the most part TV is driven by what the producers want *from* their viewers. By contrast, Fred was always motivated by what he wanted *for* his, much to the chagrin of outlets like NBC who saw in his show potential for profit. Fred's

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[25] Roderick Townley, "Fred's Shoes: The Meaning of Transitions in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*," in *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood: Children, Television, and Fred Rogers*, ed. Mark Collins and Margaret Mary Kimmel (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), 69.

[26] Ibid., 70.

[27] Ibid.,74.

unwillingness to succumb to their money-driven agenda undoubtedly cost him financially. But he remained true to living out his Christian convictions: “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?”

Whatever one’s faith, it’s a crucial question we must continue to ask. The media landscape today is rather bleak, most of us would agree, and the public discourse is often divisive and mean-spirited. Admittedly, it’s hard to see a way out of that morass. It might even tempt us to despair. But that would be to succumb to the pessimism of Postman and be stuck alongside him in the quagmire of critique. Fred offers a better way. Following his example, we can meet the problems we see and leverage our gifts and influence to make a real difference. With our own courage, conviction, and commitment, we can carry forward the promise of *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* even today.