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How Do We Make Goodness Attractive?

Fred Rogers*

Prior to his death, Fred Rogers agreed to contribute this Essay, excerpted from the remarks and the acceptance speech he gave in 1999 at his induction into the Television Hall of Fame, in recognition both of Newton Minow, a fellow advocate in the quest for improved television programming for children, and of the cause they shared.

The Editors are proud to include this Essay, with the permission of the Rogers family and of Family Communications, Inc., as a tribute to the life and work of Fred Rogers.

I'm not that interested in "mass" communications. I'm much more interested in what happens between *this* person and the *one* person watching. The space between the television set and that person who's watching is *very* holy ground.

I was in my parents' home, and I saw this fairly new thing called television. I thought, "This is going to be something that could revolutionize our country in a wonderful way." And so after I graduated from college I went to NBC in New York. I was assigned to such programs as the *Gabby Hayes Show* and the *Kate Smith Hour*. I found out that educational television was starting in Pittsburgh, so I was one of the first to [help launch] WQED [part of NET, the National Educational Television, precursor to PBS].

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* Fred Rogers, Speech at Induction into the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences Television Hall of Fame (Feb. 27, 1999). During his career, Rogers received two Peabody Awards, four Emmy Awards, a "Lifetime Achievement" Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest honor for a civilian.

Someone said, "Well, we will need to have a children's program." Josie Carey and I said, "Well, we'll make a children's program." We called it *The Children's Corner*. We just developed things as they came to us. I had this bag of puppets at home, and I would bring them in. *The Children's Corner* was on the air eight years.

A friend of mine who was head of children's programming at CBC in Canada asked if I would do a program for him. Fred Rainsberry said, "Fred, I've seen you talk with children. I'd like you to translate that to television." I said, "You mean, in front of the camera?"

We did that for a year. Joanne and I decided that we would like to raise the boys in Pittsburgh. So we came back from Canada, and people asked if we would integrate some of the Canadian material into programming for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*.

We feel on the *Neighborhood* that whatever is mentionable is much more manageable. For children to be able to see us dealing with such things as the death of a pet, or the trauma of living through a divorce—these are all things that are allowed to be talked about and allowed to be felt. What some children can put up with, grow into, and then later flourish and help others with, is a wonderful mystery.

"Fame" is a four-letter word; and like "tape" or "zoom" or "face" or "pain" or "life" or "love," what ultimately matters is what we do with it.

I feel that those of us in television are chosen to be servants. It doesn't matter what our particular job; we are chosen to help meet the deeper needs of those who watch and listen, day and night.

The conductor of the orchestra at the Hollywood Bowl grew up in a family that had little interest in music, but he often tells people he found his early inspiration from the fine musicians on television.

Last month, a thirteen-year-old boy abducted an eight-year-old girl; and when people asked him why, he said he learned about it on TV. "Something different to try," he said. "Life's cheap; what does it matter?"

Well, life isn't cheap. It's the greatest mystery of any millennium, and television needs to do all it can to broadcast that—to show and tell what the good in life is all about.

But how do we make goodness attractive? By doing whatever we can to bring courage to those whose lives move near our own—by treating our neighbor at least as well as we treat ourselves and allowing that to inform everything we produce.

We all have only one life to live on Earth. And through television, we have the choice of encouraging others to demean this life or to cherish it in creative, imaginative ways.