

Santa Clara University Scholar Commons

Psychology

College of Arts & Sciences

6-2003

“Won’t you be my neighbor?” Mr. Rogers as an ethical model

Thomas G. Plante

Santa Clara University, tplante@scu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/psych>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Plante, T. G. (2003). “Won’t you be my neighbor?” Mr. Rogers as an ethical model. *Clio's Psyche: Understanding the 'Why' of Culture, Current Events, History, and Society*, 10, 23.

Copyright © 2003 Psychohistory Forum. Reprinted with permission.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Arts & Sciences at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact rsroggin@scu.edu.

"Won't You Be My Neighbor?":

Mr. Rogers as an Ethical Model

Thomas G. Plante
Santa Clara University and
Stanford University School of Medicine

Like so many people influenced by "Mr. Rogers Neighborhood," I was surprised and saddened to hear the news of Fred Rogers' death in late February from stomach cancer at the age of 74. I remember watching "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" on a regular basis after school while growing up. His show first appeared on public television in 1968 when I was eight-years-old. I watched it regularly until I was 11 or 12, and then occasion-ally into my teens with my sister who was seven years younger.

Mr. Rogers appeared so different from most of the men I knew in my working-class town in northern Rhode Island. My father was a high school dropout who worked in construction, and wasn't very interested in education or discussing feelings. Mr. Rogers expressed care and concerns for others, was soft-spoken and thoughtful, found it easy to discuss his feelings with both children and adults, and seemed attentive to both ethical and spiritual matters. He intrigued me. I felt drawn to his lessons and insights into human behavior. When I learned over the years that he was an ordained Presbyterian minister as well as a person who had academic training in child development, I was not at all surprised. I was also not surprised to learn that *many* people reported that he was the same kind of person in private as he was in public: He apparently was very much himself on his television show.

I do believe that Mr. Rogers and his show influenced me to become a clinical psychologist. I knew of no psychologists or other mental health professionals while growing up. My mother, how-ever, was an elementary school teacher and thought highly of public television in general and Mr. Rogers in particular. I believe that Mr. Rogers taught me that men can be thoughtful, sensitive, and open in discussing their feelings, and can see all of life as special. On reflection, I now see him as both an ethical and spiritual model.

In my most recent book, *Do the Right Thing. Living Ethically in an Unethical World* (in press), I introduce a five-point model of value ethics. The approach comes from what we have learned over the years from moral philosophy as

well as the influence of the American Psychological Association's Ethics Code. The model reflects the following values that can be applied to all behavior: respect, responsibility, integrity, competence, and concern. As I think of what Mr. Rogers modeled and promoted on his long-running public television show, I believe that he well embodied these important ethical principles. He clearly emphasized that all life should be treated respectfully and that we must be responsible for our thoughts and behavior. He also clearly embodied and modeled integrity, highlighting the importance of being honest, fair, and just in all that we do and say. He also emphasized the importance of competence and appeared to highly appreciate and delight in the skills of his guests and show characters. Finally, he often highlighted and well patterned the need to experience and express concern for others. Perhaps his ability to express concern and appreciation for others was what impressed me above all. In doing so, he well modeled good ethical behavior, thinking, and decision-making.

When I think of other television personalities and celebrities, they all fall short in comparison to Mr. Rogers as examples for children and families. Mr. Rogers well modeled what it means to be a good neighbor. If more people were like Mr. Rogers, we would indeed all be better neighbors and likely not experience so many of the devastating societal and international problems that we have today. I with more people were watching and learning from his excellent example.

My sadness at Mr. Rogers' death is tempered by the knowledge that he was a positive influence in the lives of so many, and that in subtle (and perhaps not so subtle ways) he lives on in the hearts and minds of those influenced by him. I am pleased and proud that his influence touched me and contributed to the person I am and the person I hope to be. I do not regret watching his show even when I was perhaps "too old" to watch "children's programming." Thank you. Mr. Rogers. Rest in peace, my good neighbor.

Thomas G. Plante, PhD, ABPP, is Professor of Psychology at Santa Clara University and a Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine. He may be reached at <tplante@scu.edu>. □

Introduce a friend to the Psychohistory Forum/Clio's Psyche. Contact Paul H. Elovitz.